

Big 12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 10, 2023

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Municipal Auditorium

Baylor Lady Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Darianna Littlepage-Buggs

Caitlin Bickle

Postgame Press Conference

Iowa State 74, Baylor 63

THE MODERATOR: Welcome in Baylor. We have Coach Nicki Collen, and we have student athletes, Darianna Littlepage-Buggs and Caitlin Bickle.

Coach?

COACH COLLEN: I don't think we started the game very well, but we figured it out slowly and surely and chipped into the lead, and we started to play really good basketball.

I thought for 30 minutes after the first five I thought we played really, really good Baylor basketball.

20 assists on 26 turnover -- 20 assists on 26 made baskets is really, really good, and it's who we are. When we are at our best we're sharing it and moving it.

Then the last five minutes I felt like we got outplayed because they knew what they were doing. We didn't stick with what got us back in the game, and then kind of in that competitive situation.

We were attacking the rim. We were rolling behind them. Buggs was shooting layups; Caitlin got layups and and-one's, and when they got good at playing downhill late, they were living in the lane and made wide-open threes and layups.

We took three straight jump shots, contested, long twos or a three. We shot ourselves in the foot. That was the difference in the game. We couldn't recover from those three straight possessions where we didn't get a paint touch and move the basketball.

I thought that was the difference in the game. I thought



Ashley Joens was fantastic in the fourth quarter. I thought Emily Ryan did a great job of playing downhill. She just wouldn't be -- wouldn't stop going downhill late, and that was the difference for them.

Q. Caitlin, you guys had a lot of success in that give-and-go. Was that something from the beginning, or something y'all figured out as you went along that would work on the passes from either Sarah or Jana?

CAITLIN BICKLE: It's not anything new. We practiced it all week. We practiced it before we played them all three times. Especially the way -- you couldn't go under a ball screen reader with Sarah because of the way she can shoot and the way that she can attack.

So obviously we worked on it all week. I think we executed for the most part, until like Coach said, we started settling and they weren't.

Q. Buggs, Ashley Joens, how difficult of a match-up is she? She can shoot the three, obviously, but she is also good inside, too.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: That's a tough assignment because she can shoot and she can also play downhill. When she does attack downhill, she plays underneath. So being disciplined and you have to stay down, that was probably the hardest thing. But also knowing when and not to help on her, because she does have that three.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you. Questions for Coach.

Q. Coach, it just seems like you've been up against it with a lot of things, with injuries, with everything. I know this is a tough loss, but are you proud of the way they've developed and kind of fought through everything this year?

COACH COLLEN: Yeah. I mean, how good is Buggs? She just -- she just never quits playing, you know? I don't think there is a match-up that she has where someone doesn't have 10, 20, 30, 40 pounds on her, but she is

relentless on the glass.

She knows what she's good at and she goes and does it. There is a workman-like approach. She wants to win. Kind of a cool thing nobody knows, but she was a state champion in Oklahoma last year. First kid I've ever seen defend in a MacDonald's All-American team.

She had two teammates on her high school team. One was Freshman of the Year in the WAC and one was Freshman of the Year at Texas Southern. That's three winners. They aren't all Power Five kids, but she is a winner. She is absolutely a winner.

She just never quits. And she never shows frustration. She has it. But she just keeps clipping along. She never misses a shot and doesn't run back on defense. Those things you have to coach young kids. You don't have to coach that out of her.

She is going to develop her perimeter game even more. We're not done. I'm not planning on being done, but her future is so bright. Probably the least shocking thing was her being unanimous Freshman of the Year.

I think Bella is going to have the versatility to play more three and be a post-up three. We were thwarted by injuries all year relative to her being able to do that.

But I think she is tough. She didn't make the three today but she is capable of making the three, so I think those two are really good long-term, three, four, instead of four, five, but we didn't have a choice this year.

Even Kyla Abraham, her minutes against Texas were really good. It's a tough match-up for her. Texas is going to be around the rim with their bigs, and Iowa State is everywhere but around the rim.

I'm proud of how we battled in the environment. Whether we won four in a row or lost three in a row I think they believe they're going to win. I think we have to get better at truly understanding why we succeed. I think the difference between us and Iowa State is that I know Emily Ryan and Lexi Donarski are only juniors, but they are like seventh year juniors because they have been starting since they were freshman.

I'm sure people will feel that way about Buggs and Bella after they've been in the league a few years. But Ashley Joens is relentless and they are just better at what they do late in the game than what we did to be there.

They didn't even blink and say, I gotta make a play right now. They just kept doing what they had done for the 35

minutes before then. We took three jump shots. I'm not saying we aren't capable of making them, but that's not what put us in position to be in a tie game, to be down one possession.

Yeah, I'm proud of them. We haven't really quit against anybody. We haven't played really poorly since we were at Oklahoma State and Kansas State. I don't think we showed up, but every other game we have competed.

Q. Seemed like Jana changed the game the first half, then you got her back in the second half. How nice was that to see?

COACH COLLEN: I'm happy for her. I'm happy for our team. Seven assists and one turnover is pretty damn good. She even had some plays that we didn't make baskets on that I thought were really, really good decisions.

You know, Bill may say otherwise, but they've pretty much played us the same way for three games, and they guard Ja'Mee and Sarah really, really hard. Pretty much like a triangle and two. They switch on our other three and stay attached. Lexi Donarski stays attached and Denae Fritz stays attached, but they play our other kids really, really soft.

I thought one of the advantages Jana did well tonight, not to take away from how she played, but they played her soft. They didn't get up in her face and they made the decisions easier for her to see, and I thought she made the right decisions, which was awesome. Her slip passes were good, when to throw a bounce pass, a chest pass.

She did a great job of delivering the ball. She put the ball on the baseline a couple times and passed to Buggs in the high post. They weren't on her hip or really pressuring her. They jumped her the last game we played 'em, so today I'm like, hey, when it's Jana to start, we're going to DHO everything so they can't jump out and trap the ball screen.

So that got her comfortable, I think, by us getting into that with her to start. But it was great. I think the only thing -- I think Jana is capable of doing that that she has just really struggled to do this season is make open shots.

She is a really, really good shooter and she got a couple wide-open looks, but I thought she did a really good job of not trying to do too much, you know? And she just was really simple. And simple is good. Simple is really good.

Q. Is there any way to wall off Ashley when she starts burrowing down there and getting that kind of position?

COACH COLLEN: It's really hard. I think she is really hard to guard and I think she is really, really hard to officiate because there is so much contact. She is trying to get under your armpit. At times we've been really, really effective doubling her on her spins, and at times we were -- she has turned the ball over a lot against us this season.

I thought our mistakes that were made were not in the lane on her, but we gave her too many threes. We didn't close space well enough, because we had help when she put the ball on the floor. But I told our freshman who guarded her the majority of the time, there is no help if you're playing too far off the arc, if you don't close out.

We can help if she beats you off the bounce, but we can't help you from three, and 15 threes is way too many. She hasn't shot those well from three the last two games against us, and she didn't start the game necessarily, but she finished the game really well from three.

Q. A lot of positives from this game up until those two threes that Ashley hit. What are you going to take away from this game going into the NCAA Tournament?

COACH COLLEN: When we move the ball, and the ball didn't stick and we got it moving side-to-side and shifted the D, we got about anything we wanted. I think when you get in those late-game situations and you are in one- and two-possession games, that's when you got to be even more focused on getting to really good shots.

We were in the bonus. We were taking jump shots. We just have to understand that's the time. They were not going to be denied a piece of the paint down the stretch. Those threes happened because they got a piece of the paint.

Now, I think Morgan Kane lived in the paint for about 12 seconds on most possessions, but I think they were living in the paint, and then it was the kick-back threes. I feel like that's what they do. They force you to help, and then they kick it out.

They're not a team that just passes and cuts and shoots threes. They attack. They attack your close-outs. I thought Emily Ryan was a huge difference-maker tonight. Getting to the foul line, playing downhill. It was a challenge for Jana when I had her in was she just is outmatched physically, length, and size wise against her.

I just don't -- I don't have much that I can bring in big, you know, to change that, that can keep the ball pressure on her and then can also kind of wall up and make her miss around the rim. When we have to over-rotate, now we are

in a scramble situation and now they're going to probably get an open three.

Q. Coach, it seemed like Jaden in the first half was on her way to a career game, and then went quiet in the second half. But at the same time, you have to think you can maybe keep her in your back pocket and get that out of her once the NCAA Tournament comes around.

COACH COLLEN: I thought her shots were super rhythmic in the first half. They were on an extra pass. They were a piece of the paint, kick out, plus one. I was talking about it before. They dared her to shoot. That's how they play. It's not how they play everyone, it's not us.

They're going to look at your analytics and say shooter, nonshooter, drive her, drive her right, sit on her right hand. They sit on Caitlin's right hand. They play in off of Buggs. Zingaro played about 14 feet off of Buggs when she was guarding her.

They're the most scout-heavy team we play all year. We're similar, but we don't just -- we help off people. We play tendencies. They're going to say if you're less than a 20% 3-point shooter we're not guarding you, and we're going to play the law of averages and say even if you make 'em early, law of averages is going to figure out over a 30-game season, right?

So I thought she got them rhythmically and I thought she forced some in the second half, and when she plays downhill and makes reads, that's when Jaden is at her best. I thought our pace was really good in the first half and we played through the trail all night long. We lots of times play into drags and step-ups, but we wanted to move the ball and get the ball swung immediately in transition.

I thought that was effective because we weren't forcing her to make every early decision. We were putting it in Sarah's hands more, which is why she had nine assists. We put it in Jana's hands, we swung it into action, and then it would come back to her.

So I thought that was really good for her as well. I thought you saw a really, really good Jaden in the first half, and then she just missed shots in the second half. I don't think she stopped playing hard, but I think she took really simple, easy shots in the first half.

Q. Nicki, what's gotta come together for you guys to advance in the NCAA Tournament?

COACH COLLEN: Well, I think it will start with not getting outrebounded by 25. We have not been that bad this year.

I think it started at the beginning. They got on the boards. The first three or four minutes they had five or six early offensive rebounds. They had six second-chance points before the first media timeout.

We didn't scramble. When we rebound well, it's because, Buggs is always going to rebound, but it's when our guards scrap and fight and get in there and rundown long rebounds. And so we gotta start there. We gotta play the game that we played for 30 minutes for 40. Now, everybody is going to play us differently. We haven't played against a team that zoned us maybe since Kansas State the first time we played them, but we may play against a zone team.

We have to buy in that when we do what we do well, man or zone, that we're a team that has the most success when we have balanced scoring, when we move the basketball, when we assist on the majority of our baskets. We're just not a one-on-one team, and we obviously don't have someone we can just throw it to on the low block and let Emily play one-on-one.

So because of that, we need to rely on pace, pace end-to-end and sideline-to-sideline, and when our pace sideline-to-sideline was really good we were hard to guard. And when our pace wasn't good, to begin the game, for instance, we were easier to guard. We just have to scrap. We're not very big and we're not very deep. We have to scrap.

We're beat up, but so is everybody else this time of year. Certainly there are teams like OU that play ten players, but the majority of teams out there play six, seven, sometimes eight players.

We're playing seven consistently, and I thought I did a pretty good job of rotating and keeping people a little fresher tonight.

But, you know, when it's win or go home you can't be tired. I mean, it's just -- there is an off-season to rest. We can't act tired, that's for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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