

Big 12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 9, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Kansas State Wildcats

Coach Jeff Mittie

Serena Sundell

Ayoka Lee

Postgame Press Conference

Kansas State - 65, West Virginia - 62

THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by Kansas State Head Coach Jeff Mittie and student-athletes Serena Sundell and Ayoka Lee. Coach?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, heck of a game. We knew it would be. We just come off of ten days ago playing these guys an overtime game at our place, hard fought both ways, a game of runs as you saw tonight, was the same thing. They got off to a great start, knocking a lot of 3's down. Our defense got a lot better as the game went on and we started to make some plays. Then we had some self-inflicted problems, but West Virginia does that to a lot of people. They led the league in steals and they led the league in forcing turnovers and we do a lot of home runs to them in that stretch when they came back. I think they had a 10-point lead and we lost our composure, but proud of my group for regrouping. Made a lot of plays down the stretch. We had a lot of players, I thought Gabby Gregory gave us a big lift in that stretch. We got good minutes, solid minutes from Eliza Maupin. I thought we got solid minutes from Taryn in that stretch. I thought Zy Walker was a real key tonight, good energy, defensively did some good things.

That's a really good basketball team and we're excited to be able to advance.

Q. Ayoka, after missing all of last year and so much of this year with injury, how good does it feel to be out there contributing to a team win at this time of year?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, it's really exciting. Any opportunity I have to get on the court with my teammates is exciting. It's fun. I love playing with my teammates.



Q. Can you talk about opening up your Big 12 experience this year and an environment like the T-Mobile Center tonight?

SERENA SUNDELL: I was super excited to play in the T-Mobile Center and get out of Municipal. This was a great environment. It kind of felt like a home game for us. I thought we had a great crowd. That was a fun game. West Virginia is a good team. They had a great crowd, they're scrappy. They didn't go away. We were not in Manhattan, that they were going to fight till the very end. That was a great basketball game. I thought it was a very March-type of basketball game, but we're lucky to survive and advance so we're on to the next.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I mean, it's really fun, the first game is really fun, playing here, like Serena said, it felt like we had a home crowd which is really cool. It's like a college basketball atmosphere in March. It's a little bit different than Municipal, so thankful. It's exciting and fun.

Q. For both of y'all, Coach said a lot of turnovers come when you play West Virginia, but what is it like to keep that resilience and mental energy along with fouls coming with that?

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I mean, their press is tough. Coach got on me early in the game and I needed that. He just said you gotta get your head right and get locked into the game here. So I think we did a good job of learning as we went on, but, yeah, we had a lot of self-inflicted turnovers, especially at the end of the third that got them back in the game and we talked about that in our huddle that the game was in our control. They were scoring off our turnovers and getting to the free throw line. Some silly fouls. So we just have to keep learning and talking about those things and adjust through the game.

AYOKA LEE: I think we did a really good job of keeping our eyes forward, and I think it was the same thing in Manhattan. We knew we were going to get some turnovers. They're a good defensive team. But keeping our eyes forward and playing every possession present was important and I think we did that.

Q. Ayoka, you broke the career rebounding record. After missing last year, how proud are you of your abilities to do that and, Serena, how proud are you to have her as a teammate?

AYOKA LEE: Really just thankful. Like I said, every game is just going to be a fun opportunity to play with my teammates. Just really thankful. I think it takes a lot just to have that accomplishment and really good teammates and coaches that put you in a the position to achieve that. So thankful, yeah.

SERENA SUNDELL: I think I learned quickly last year without her not to take her rebounding for granted. So to have her back and being such a force in the paint and someone who is just a magnet to the ball and goes and gets it and can find her outlet and just helps us get our offense going.

Q. Ayoka, you had a size mismatch throughout the game. And I think when you started to attack that the offense started to find its groove, how do you approach attacking those situations? And then Serena, how important is it for Ayoka to be able to attack those height mismatches in the post?

AYOKA LEE: I think definitely taking advantage of it is important. I think being patient, getting the right angles on my post-ups and being able to, like, flow well with the guards and where the ball is, is important. And I think they did a really good job of getting it in to me, so yeah.

SERENA SUNDELL: We knew going into this game that they didn't have a single person who could compare to her and stop her inside. So we knew we wanted to look at her right away, but West Virginia did a good job of sending other people down there. I think overall we did a good job of finding you, and sending people into the high post and getting high/lows, and when they do stick on her so hard that's different from normal basketball. When we're driving, they're not coming over to help. So as guards we recognized that early and did a good job in the first half of driving and giving what they were -- taking what they were giving us.

Q. Serena, what impressed you about Gabby in that run in the fourth quarter?

SERENA SUNDELL: Oh, man. She is fun to play with. She brings a lot of passion and fire to this team. It's been great the last two games seeing her knock down shots. And she has been shooting with confidence this whole entire year, but to see her get back into the groove and be such a threat on the three-point line is what we need from

her. That's exciting going into the postseason and I'm excited to keep going.

Q. You've mentioned it, Serena, but talk about how important it was for the guards especially attacking the paint and what you were seeing with West Virginia's defense not sliding over when they were guarding Ayoka.

SERENA SUNDELL: When we broke the press and we got ahead of their defense, we were playing pretty well. We knew they didn't have a help side and we were going to have driving lanes or Ayoka was going to have no backside. So I think we just drove with the press and that's something we will keep working on in the postseason.

Yeah, but I think we did a good job of reading their defense and sending people to the high post and that was all part of -- I mean, we've been working on that coming into this week. So we've been -- I think our preparation helped us tonight.

Q. Coach, this is a question for you. Kind of an odd format in this tournament, you guys get tomorrow off before then playing on Monday. What challenges does that have and are you happy that you get that day off? What does your preparation look like for Texas?

JEFF MITTIE: I'm ecstatic that we get tomorrow off. You have the late game. I think it's cruel that we have decided to lose an hour of sleep during March. I think that's ridiculous for coaches, we already lose hours of sleep in March. But, no, it will be good for us to have the day off. One of the things coming into this, we knew with the format with 14 teams and we had earned the double bye as the 3 seed, and we wanted to take advantage of that if we could. Certainly a day off in preparation for a game versus a really talented Texas team I think will help both of us.

Q. Can you talk about how difficult it is to keep your focus on the tournament that's at hand and not the national tournament that's coming up and trying to get a better seed going into the national tournament? Talk about keeping your focus for this tournament.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think -- I don't know, I don't think it's been too hard for us so far. I think our team is really locked to where we're at. I think we're good at keeping our feet, yeah, keeping our feet where we are or being where our feet are, that's what I was looking for.

So, yeah, it's really about just going out on any given night and giving them our best shot and to do that we have to be present. So, yeah, I think we've done a good job.

SERENA SUNDELL: I think we've done a good job as well taking it one game at a time. We're excited to play Texas again. The last time we played them it was a close game so we want to go out and play them again. The Big 12 Tournament is such a fun tournament, seeing all these teams for potentially one last time this year. I know we're out for a little bit of revenge for some teams. So we're just taking it one game at a time and also I know that K-State women's basketball has never won a Big 12 Tournament. So we are all locked in. We know it's going to impact our seeding and all that stuff for the NCAA Tournament, but I think our team is doing a good job of staying present here.

Q. Coach, I think in the beginning of the game Ayoka got pulled out of the paint because of the way that their big could shoot and when you guys were able to get her back in the paint the defense sort of changed. How important was it for you guys to get her back in the paint on defense and how did you go about that?

JEFF MITTIE: I think the foul trouble Blacksten changed that. When Blacksten went out, that changes who they bring in. They bring in the Diggs kid who's not a 3-point threat. They bring in Moore kid who doesn't stretch you as much as Blacksten does. So we gotta get Lee touches and defend Blacksten not only when she is on offense, but we have to make her play defense and we were able to get a couple of fouls on her early.

We played a little bit of zone when Blacksten was in the game. So that took away some of the advantage of her picking and popping against Lee. I thought we played the zone fairly solid. I thought we were decent at it. I thought we broke up some of their rhythm. But Blacksten is a real -- people attack Lee similarly in the sense that they want to try to draw her out of the paint because if they can get her out of the paint, you're taking away one of the best shot blockers, one of the best rim defenders in the country. So people come in with that kind of game plan quite often.

Q. It seemed like tonight's game played a similar pattern as the last time you two met in terms of y'all were behind in the first quarter, second quarter started to gain momentum. Did that feeling ever cross your mind? If so, did that help put you and the team at ease during such a close match-up?

JEFF MITTIE: I think you're right about that. The one thing they have done well all year -- it's hard to simulate. It's hard to simulate that press. Harrison and Quinerly are so quick. It's not like we have a lot of practice squad that practices the press, has the instinct. So some of that is catching up to the fastball a little bit. And they've done that to a lot of people. We did rewatch that as a team. For us the difference was I didn't like our defense. I felt like if our

defense was better, that margin wouldn't have been as great, but our defense wasn't very solid. So, yeah, once we started locking up defensively better, we started taking care of the ball better, we were getting some good looks. That second quarter for us, we had a lot of people playing well. Brylee Glenn came in, Serena got drives to the basket, Kay got stuff at the rim. We had a lot of people playing well and that's what it's going to take to beat West Virginia.

Q. Coach, how are you going to take this win and use it as a lesson moving forward as you take those next steps into having a successful month?

JEFF MITTIE: When you are playing the quality of basketball that we had in this league all year long and you're looking at the teams that have been ranked and the quality of wins that every -- lots of teams. You look at the balance of this league and so there are a lot of tight games. We played as tight of games in February as any year that I've had.

We had -- we missed Lee for, I think, seven games, maybe eight games. I can't remember what the number was, but we were grinding out some really hard-fought wins. I think Serena said it best. It felt like March basketball. It felt like NCAA Tournament basketball. It had a great atmosphere in T-Mobile tonight and we're glad that we came out on top tonight.

Q. Coach, not only from an X's and O's standpoint, just personally, how cool is it that Ayoka gets to be in the game contributing at this point in the season?

JEFF MITTIE: You know, to watch her not be able to do much for a long time, and it wore on her. It wore on her. She was part of the pandemic group, battling the knee, having the knee require what it required and knowing that that recovery was going to be not seven months, not eight months, but more 12 to 14, and to watch her just grind in there every day. I mean, it's special. Special to watch, special to watch. Sometimes I have to catch myself because you're so much in the fight that, you know, sometimes you need to take a step back and just appreciate it. Appreciate the opportunity to coach her, appreciate the opportunity to watch this team play with her.

Gabby has mentioned it numerous times that, you know, she came to play with Ayoka. That was a big selling point that she thought, hey, I want to play with that player. And Gabby said it maybe senior night, was that she knew how great of a player she was, she didn't know how great of a teammate she was. So there's no question that it's special for all of us to be a part of it and I'm just fortunate to have coached her. I love that.

Q. (No microphone.)

JEFF MITTIE: Well, you know, there is no doubt. There is no doubt. She is a game changer, you know. When we played well around her tonight, we were really hard to stop. Really hard to stop. You look at some of our numbers tonight, I mean, we shoot 57% from the field, 72% in the second quarter, 63% in the fourth. A lot of that is the gravity is all on Lee. So if we make the right decision off that gravity, we can play well around her. It's a little like Quinerly for them. Gravity. Everybody's got to pay attention. Lee does that for us in a different way.

Q. Coach, you mentioned Quinerly. Walker entered the game with three minutes left and it looked like she had the Quinerly assignment. Talk about her defensive impact late in the last three minutes.

JEFF MITTIE: That was a big stretch. We talked about that at halftime. That was a big stretch when Walker came in because she cooled Quinerly off just a little bit. And I thought she had a good look to her and Quinerly is a tough guard. You just gotta make it tough on her. Her numbers tonight, you know, they're similar to the numbers that she had in Manhattan with the exception of she shot the three so well tonight. When she's making three's, man, she is so quick, she is a tough guard, but I thought Walker really played well tonight.

Q. Coach, bouncing off Zyanna and Eliza, Taryn, a pretty deep squad, how much do you appreciate them this time of year?

JEFF MITTIE: Our bench has given us good minutes. I thought Maupin was solid tonight, I thought Walker -- Taryn settled us down from a ball handling standpoint and then she kind of got caught up and a little bit rushed. I think our bench has played well all year. Sanchez didn't get a lot of minutes tonight, but I wouldn't be surprised to see her play well the rest of the tournament. So our bench has been a big key to our success both at the offensive end and the defensive end. And tonight, with Lee getting in foul trouble, that was a critical stretch for Maupin to come in and steady the ship for us for those five or six minutes.

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