

Big 12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Monday, March 11, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Iowa State Cyclones Coach Bill Fennelly Emily Ryan Audi Crooks

Postgame Press Conference



Iowa State - 85, Oklahoma - 68

THE MODERATOR: We are we are joined by Iowa State Head Coach Bill Fennelly, student-athletes Emily Ryan and Audi Crooks. Coach?

BILL FENNELLY: I want to make a couple quick points. Number one, thank you to all the fans who came down from Ames to watch. Number two, I have the utmost respect for Oklahoma. That's a great, great team who beat us really bad at our place and the way we played today -- they caught us on a bad day for them and a great day for us. So they're going to be really tough out in the NCAA Tournament, and hopefully they're hosting. If you win this league and you have the kind of talent they have, they should be hosting in the NCAA Tournament.

And lastly, obviously couldn't be more proud of our team. That's as good a 30 minutes as we possibly could have played and we did it at the right time. So, excited that we get to come back and play tomorrow.

Q. Emily and Audi, Coach talked about the difference in the first game you guys played them and today. What do you guys do differently?

EMILY RYAN: Truthfully, honestly from top to bottom everything was better. From the way we came out and executed offensively and defensively, you can go down the list. For the most part, I think you can say that every single part of the game we played better today than at home the last time we played them. It's a credit to the coaches getting us ready and preparing us the right way and then the team locking in and doing what we could in only an one-day prep and we turned out and were really focused and I think that was the big difference today.

AUDI CROOKS: We just brought eye level focus and intensity. It's a lot easier to beat someone if you've seen them. At home it was our first time playing them and we didn't know what to expect, but we kind of saw them and experienced that. So we knew how to combat that and we came out on top today.

Q. Emily, can you just talk about this season, the growth of particularly Audi and Addy, watching the two of them and what they've done, just as young players, how much they've grown day-to-day?

EMILY RYAN: Yeah. It's fun to watch them come to work every single day and how much they want to get better and how much they want to be pushed. And it's not always smooth for the team and for individuals, but regardless of how the day before went, they're showing up the next day wanting to get better with the same attitude every day regardless if they're coming off a good day or a bad day. It's a credit to them and the way they work and show up every day and then it's a credit to everyone else around them, as well, because the rest of the freshmen also show up every day and push them to be better, too.

Q. Coach, I'm interested in your thoughts when you have freshmen talent like this with Audi and Addy and you see them coming into their postseason tournament and having a performance like today's game. Can you characterize how impressed you've been with how they handled today's game and the performances they've had as freshmen?

BILL FENNELLY: Obviously, what you see are two -- all of our freshmen, especially Addy and Audi, are extremely talented players. You don't play the way they're playing at this level without having God-given talent. I say at home every day they were raised right by great parents who taught them to work hard and accept hard coaching and they get to play with Emily Ryan. You put all that stuff together, Iowa State is the beneficiary of that and they show that every single day.

Q. Audi and Emily, I was be wondering, seemed like there was a ton of excitement when Addy hit that three

at the end of halftime. What did that do for momentum, excitement, confidence, stuff like that?

EMILY RYAN: I think anytime you can hit a big bucket going into the end of the quarter or the end of the half it's huge for momentum because you're going to be sitting on that last play for a while. It was a huge hit by her and just a lot of excitement. That's the fun thing about this team is that everyone was excited about it, and everyone was more excited about it than even Addy and she is the one that hit the shot.

That's what's fun about this team. We're more happy about each other's success than our own and that's what's going to continue to make us better each day.

Q. Audi, being the versatile player you are, what is your leadership role on this team?

AUDI CROOKS: That's a great question. I first had to kind of learn how to conduct myself coming into this year. Before you can lead you have to be able to follow and I've certainly got a great leader in Emily Ryan. And I don't think that -- I try to lead in the way that I play. In high school and years before I'm kind of a vocal person, and when you got the General over here, I don't need to do that. So I just try to make sure I'm on my P's and Q's and cheering on my teammates. So I try to lead by example and to just show up every day and grow in this process in this first year.

Q. Audi, you talked about seeing Oklahoma once and how that helped a little bit. Obviously, you guys know how they like to get up and down quickly, score quickly. How did you like defensively you were really able to keep them from playing the kind of game they wanted to?

AUDI CROOKS: Yeah, we matched up really well. Like you said, they do put that emphasis on transition. So our guards sprinted back, got to the lane first and then the bigs got back and we just kind of matched up from there. So, credit to the guards for sprinting back and holding it down while we were getting boards or making buckets.

Q. So you guys had a ton of momentum in that first half and it grew in the second half. What was done to keep it and build on that?

EMILY RYAN: Yeah, I think the big thing was just staying in the moment trying to win each possession. Honestly, I was surprised when I looked up and saw that the score was as wide as it was because we were so locked in in the moment and trying to take each possession one at a time. And so I think when we're able to do that and look at it one at a time rather than the big picture, it's good for use to

break it down like that. So we just ride the momentum from play to play and when we make a bad one we try to make the next one right and if we make a good one we're trying to build on it.

AUDI CROOKS: I second that. There was a moment I looked up for the first time in a long time and I saw that there was a bit of a deficit and it was kind of like, oh, all right. Not a deficit, but a gap. Like she said, we try to focus on the moment, stay in the moment. You know, 40 minutes, but we play it by the quarters, we play it to the media. Just do whatever you can to piece together good plays, good plays, good plays. When a bad one comes along, watch it, continue to work and focus on the next one.

Q. Emily, Big 12 title game tomorrow. You've been here before, but a lot of the impact players on your team haven't been. What's your advice to them as the leader on the team and as someone with a lot more experience?

EMILY RYAN: That's been the case pretty much every game we've walked into this year is that it's the first time and they have embraced every challenge really well and I have no doubt they will do the same thing tomorrow. I think the big thing for us is just to approach it like we do any other game, do what we need to do and take care of ourselves and then let the outcome take care of itself. The big I think is to stay in the moment and not try to do anything we haven't done before, just keep doing what we're doing.

Q. Coming from y'all, the student-athletes, what do you want people to know about this team that they don't know?

AUDI CROOKS: That's a good question. This team runs deeper than what you see on the court. This team has struggled a little bit this year to kinda find our legs. We're new and I'm not going to sit here and tell you that it's been picture perfect because it hasn't. We have struggled. But one thing about us is we are always going to come back from it. We're always going to learn and grow from whatever mistakes we make. We've persevered throughout the season. We are here and a lot of people said we wouldn't be and I think that speaks volumes.

EMILY RYAN: You asked something that people don't know about our team. I think it's pretty obvious, but I'm just going to say it anyway. We're more connected than just a team playing basketball. It's a lot bigger than that and that's what makes showing up every day so much fun. You get to enjoy what you're doing with the people you do it with and that's why you just want to keep showing up every

day and that's why I'm glad we've got another game tomorrow. Anytime you're in March you just want to get as many games as possible because when you have a special team like this you don't want it to end. So, we're trying to maximize as many games we can get and I'm just glad we can show up and tip it off and play again tomorrow at 8.

Q. Emily, you've always been such a team-first player, but from an individual personal standpoint when you consider how much personnel changed from last year, the injury you went through, here you are back in the final again. Personally, what does that mean to you, to have achieved this again?

EMILY RYAN: Yeah, it's just super special to experience it last year and now kind of getting to experience it through the freshmen's lens. They're going through it for the first time and it's super special to experience it through the eyes of them and kind of lead them through it as much as I can and kind of enjoying the process. It's really cool to do it with this group because they have been through a lot and it hasn't been easy and I'm just grateful I get to show up with the coaching staff I get to show up with and the team that I get to show up with every day. And nothing more that I would ask for than showing up for a championship game tomorrow.

Q. Bill, you guys had a very strong start to the game. What do you think the key was to jumping on them early and setting that tone?

BILL FENNELLY: I think for us, I thought defensively we were really good early. We took away the things that we tried to take away. And then certainly, you know, their transition offense is so good, but it's not as good if they're taking the ball out of the net. And we shot the ball really, really well and it slowed them down a little bit, not a lot. Obviously the end of the first quarter got a little shaky, but we never had extended periods of time where they were scoring and we weren't. So the scoring runs that we were worried about really didn't happen today like it did at our place when we played them.

Q. Bill, thinking back to last year and cutting down the nets, did you think you could be back here playing for a championship regardless of what happens tomorrow night?

BILL FENNELLY: I think Emily put it perfectly. For some of us we get to come back and play in a championship game. We won it last year. Well, there are five freshmen, a D-2 transfer and another transfer that weren't in Ames last year. So they've never done it. So it's kind of like literally watching your grandkids open presents at

Christmas because it's new, it's exciting for them. This is cool. It never gets old for those of us that have been blessed to get to do it. It won't get old for Emily. We all want results and we all want to be rewarded for our efforts, and whatever happens tomorrow I think the young people on our team are going to be rewarded and play in a game that they all dream about playing when you come to college.

Q. Coach, we referenced Addy's three-pointer at the end of the half, but all three of her shots seemed to have meaning in that second half what Oklahoma kind of contracted the lead. Seems like all three of her shots were very well timed. Did she just have a sense of what you guys needed in that particular moment in terms of putting the ball in the hoop?

BILL FENNELLY: She really does. That's a great analysis of her game. There's times, I think, she doesn't understand how she can't impact a game and defers a little too much. But I think the match-ups -- and we kept telling her there are going to be opportunities because of the way they're going to guard Audi or get into Emily Ryan. There are going to be opportunities and the last play of the half we called for her and we felt like we would get a decent look at it. But the kid is so talented and understands the game at a unique level for a young person.

So, yeah, she didn't get a lot of baskets, but it seemed like every one was at the perfect time.

Q. What did you think of the contributions you got from your bench today?

BILL FENNELLY: Our bench was tremendous. Everyone that played -- I mean, we played nine kids and you look out there and you're up 10, 12, and playing great and there's 5 freshmen in the game in the second quarter. I thought Nelle was phenomenal for the minutes she played. We really wanted to play a lot of kids in the first half and get everyone to halftime with some fresh legs because we knew they were coming. Our bench continues to impact the game and I thought all of them did that today, all four of them. They couldn't have been better.

Q. Coach, you told us yesterday that not many teams can hold Oklahoma to low point totals. Your defense today was tenacious all over the place. I think Emily Ryan had a block or two. Where did that come from? What did you think about their performance?

BILL FENNELLY: I thought defensively we were pretty good. We had a couple mental lapses and let Payton stick some three's on us in transition, just like she did in Ames, but a couple things. We were fairly organized and even

though the pace was fast, when we are shooting over 50% and we're making some three, they do have to take the ball out-of-bounds and that slows you down a little bit. Then I thought we defended personnel pretty well and then we got lucky and they missed some shots that I'm sure they would think they should make. And welcome to March. That's the world we live in.

It all kinda goes together, but I thought our defensive effort was really, really solid and I thought A.J. was tremendous. We ask A.J. to do a lot and I know it looks like Payton scored a ton of points and, she's a great player, but I thought A.J. did a great job on her. And we didn't give up as many offensive rebounds as we did at home and that helped as well.

Q. Sort of a big picture question. With Oklahoma losing that's four of the Power Five conferences where number one doesn't win and South Carolina was a bank in three for making it five of five. From a perspective of just the competitiveness at this time of the year across the country, what do you think that says?

BILL FENNELLY: I think it says that there is a lot of good teams and I think that's the great part of college sports. It is March Madness for a reason. It isn't best four out of seven. It isn't three out of five. You don't have to beat someone back-to-back nights. You have to be the best team in a 40-minute game. I think that's what happened today. Oklahoma was the best team in our league. They earned it over 18 games, but today we were the better team. That's what postseason is about and that's what makes it so much fun and that's why collegiate basketball in March is the best thing going.

It's cool to see it, and it's cool that there are so many opportunities for other teams to impact not just their programs but maybe how the tournament looks to the masses.

Q. Bill, I know we referenced the crowd on Saturday, but could you talk about it for today's game?

BILL FENNELLY: Yeah. For those of you that don't cover us a whole lot, I say the same thing all the time. Iowa State fans are so unique. They are so special. Again, you drive -- I would bet there's a lot of people that drove down here Saturday morning, went home, drove down here today, are going home and they will probably come back tomorrow. The format that we are currently in with our men not playing until Thursday made me really concerned. And I should know better. Our fans are just so unique, and they did it again today. I hope, I hope that they feel like, hey, this is a team that they love to support, it's worth the drive,

and I'm sure the great people of Kansas City are loading their coolers up in their restaurants as we speak. Hopefully they all have a good night tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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