

Big 12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Monday, March 11, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Kansas State Wildcats

Coach Jeff Mittie

Gabby Gregory

Ayoka Lee

Postgame Press Conference



the perimeter. And then just being physical when I did get touches.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think toward the beginning of the game, I think that was more on the guards, on us. We didn't do a good job of that. We were relying too much on Ayoka and I think as the game went on, I think we just, you know, got a little bit cleaner and our offense better and our cuts, but I think we showed a lot of good things today and it's a lot of things we can take forward to work on, but that's obviously something we need to focus on some more because obviously everyone knows that Ayoka Lee is incredible. She brings a lot of focus to every team that we're going to play against so it's up to us guards to pick it up a little bit when we can't get it in to her.

Q. Throughout the first half and the first part of the third quarter Texas was shooting well, and then all of a sudden, they go cold. They miss ten straight shots. What changed defensively for you to be able to make that happen and get back in the game?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think we just had to keep, like, stick to the game plan and get more aggressive on defense, contest, be more aggressive on the switches. And just keep our eyes forward, I think. Not dwell on the possessions where we didn't get a stop. But, yeah, I think just continuing to keep going, I think we played our zone really well. And being locked into that and the switching defenses was important.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think just sticking to the game plan. I thought we had probably our best talk defensively that we have had in quite a while. You know, Coach Mittie gets on to us a lot to make adjustments in the game amongst ourselves and I think after he got on to us about that in the beginning of the game we did a really good job of talking to each other, making changes and just making sure we knew we were all on the same page and it really showed in our defense.

Q. For both of you, you got some basketball still in front of you. What would you say most excites you about the potential of this team in the NCAA Tournament?

Texas - 71, Kansas State - 64

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Kansas Head Coach Jeff Mittie, student-athletes Gabby Gregory and Ayoka Lee. Coach?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, proud of my group for really playing an excellent basketball game. We played well enough to win. We just came up on the short end. I thought -- boy, I thought it was an outstanding, physical, competitive game. We didn't get off to the best of starts, but we sure battled back and fought hard and did a lot of really, really good things. I am really proud of this group and disappointed with the result today, but as I told them in the locker room, you don't have to be ashamed about that one. You left it on the floor. You play like that in the NCAA Tournament, you'll have every opportunity to advance. So proud of our group. We made a lot of big plays, Texas just made a few more.

Q. (No microphone.)

GABBY GREGORY: I think we showed a lot of people tonight our competitive fight, our fire. Obviously Texas is a really, really physical, strong team and I think that we just fought right until the end. Just like Coach said, we made a lot of really great plays. They just made a few more.

Q. For Ayoka, I know a lot of the attention was on you, just like it has been through your years here. How did you work to fight through that? And Gabby, how did you work it to play off that on the perimeter?

AYOKA LEE: I think it was about getting ball movement and knowing when to post up and then just being, I guess, like, in rhythm with the guards and just their movement on

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, obviously if we play like we did today there is a lot of basketball ahead for us. So, I mean, just as many games as we can play. We just gotta, you know, get back to Manhattan, get back to work, rest our bodies a little bit, but, everything we want is still in front of us so we're going to get after it.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think going off of what Gabby said, I think just the opportunity to get back out and compete is what I'm excited for and I think what the rest of our team is excited for. I think we've -- like, even after the loss today we put ourselves in a good position to continue to be playing this season. So just taking advantage of that and getting out there and competing, yeah.

Q. For both of you, Brylee and Zyanna really took the defensive assignment on Madison Booker in the fourth quarter, pressed her at half court. Could you just talk about their intensity?

GABBY GREGORY: Obviously Madison Booker is an incredible player. So it takes a lot of people to stop her. I think just having different people come in off the bench to give her different looks, I think, was really helpful for us. Zy and Bry are both incredible defenders so they were able to get up there and bother her at times and that came up big for us.

AYOKA LEE: I think Gabby said it really well, but, yeah, I never have a question if Brylee or Zy are going to guard. They're great defenders and they come in with the intensity we need and they're going to do their job and do it well. I'm proud of how they fought and played defense tonight.

Q. For both of you, you've been through some battles, been grinding for quite a while now. I'm curious if there is any question that this team will be able to put this game behind them for the NCAA Tournament because you've been through all the battles all year.

AYOKA LEE: Um, I think every game there is something we can learn from it. So I think we're going to take what we can learn from this one and use it as motivation to compete for forty minutes. And to get back in the gym and work on the things we need to work on, and then whoever we have in the tournament give them our best shot for as long as we can.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I don't think that anybody is hanging their head about this game that we played today. I think that we proved that we're one of the best teams in the country, just like Texas is. We had moments where, you know, couple of plays could have gone a different way and maybe we could have come out with a win today. So I

don't think anybody is going to be holding on to this in the way of we're hanging our head or anything like that. I think this will motivate us and prove to us that we can play with anybody in the country and we're excited to do that.

Q. For both of you, Ayoka mentioned you guys can learn something from every game. What's the biggest thing that you can learn from this game and take into the Tournament?

GABBY GREGORY: I think we did a lot of good things today. I think one of the good parts of this game was we proved that we can rebound. We were probably outsized in a lot of positions playing Texas, and we really stuck to the game plan and I thought we did a really, really good job on the boards.

Even just our different defenses that we went to, our twelve, our man, I think we did a lot of great things. Execution on offense, obviously those are still things that we need to get better on. Coming out of timeouts and executing, things like that, we can always get better in that. I think we did a lot of good things today that will help us moving forward.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think those things should give us confidence in a lot of areas and I think we need to, like, step into that confidence sooner and believe that we can rebound, even when we are undersized. I also think just making those end-game adjustments, too, is one thing that I think we can do sooner and we can do quicker. Yeah, that's what I would say.

Q. Coach, obviously you guys now await your fate for the Selection Committee, but I'm curious as to why you think your team should be one of those top 16 seeds.

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I think a couple things. When I look at our victories -- so now that we're -- I've looked at some of the projected stuff, but Iowa looks to be a 1 or 2 seed. We've got a road victory there. We've got a road victory over Texas who right now is kind of in that same boat. We've got a road victory at Baylor. I think we have a lot on our resume that a lot of people don't have and this league has been very good. So I think that the overall body of work that we have put together, I think, is pretty good. We played -- you're going to have to look it up, but because of the unbalanced schedule in the Big 12, we played two games versus Texas, two games versus Oklahoma, two games versus Kansas, two games versus Iowa State. And those things when you take in the factor of the unbalanced schedule and you play seven of those games without Ayoka Lee, you see how dominant she was.

So, yeah, I think we've got a good case. Yeah.

Q. Coach, you just mentioned Ayoka. Obviously Texas was focused on stopping her and yet she scored more than half of your points in the first half. Talk about her value to your team, broad sense and even tonight.

JEFF MITTIE: Well, from an X's and O's standpoint, she creates a lot of gravity where teams have to really gravitate toward her. If they don't, she is going to win most one-on-one matches. She talks about what we're constantly talking to her about which is have good timing with your post-up. Guards have to deliver the ball on time, those things. When she does that, she is as good as anybody in the country at that position.

Defensively, she's probably not moving as well as she was prior to the injury. That has probably taken her some time to come back from, but she's close. She is closer. So that's on the court. Now, off the court this young lady is as good of a leader and representative of Kansas State. She sees the big picture and she understands about investing into the younger players. She understands the importance of the locker room. She understands the importance of taking this game in proper perspective and being disappointed with it but taking it into the locker room and saying, hey, we play like this. I don't worry about our locker room.

I don't worry that we're going to show up and practice hard the next practice. Those don't even cross my mind. This group has done it all year long, and what I do think this team has to learn from this is that we've got to come out of the gates better. We're coming out of the gates and putting ourselves in a hole. Our communication isn't as good early until we have problems. Those things need to get better. Ayoka Lee is really, really good at all the above.

Q. Coach, after you battle all the way back to get a lead, did your team run out of gas? Did it lose focus? Did Texas just respond well and how do you contextualize that with the work they did to get back in the game?

JEFF MITTIE: We didn't run out of gas. We didn't run out of gas, there were a couple of critical plays in that stretch that went the other way. Texas made some big plays. We had some plays that -- we made some big plays, it's just the ebbs and flows of the game that happen and there were critical plays in that stretch that we didn't make.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the talent in this league and you played Texas three times, a lot of the top teams in this league. How much does that help you heading into the tournament and how does it help you prepare

for the tournament throughout the year?

JEFF MITTIE: I think playing good people prepares you. I think competing the way that this team has competed all year prepares you. When you get to the NCAA Tournament, just like this tournament, we didn't worry about where people seeded; we took 'em off the bracket. We will do the same with the NCAA Tournament we will have to play well against whoever we play. Doesn't matter. I've been on the 11 seed, I've been seeded in those things.

We've got a good basketball team. But we have to play well. And in order to advance, you've got to go in the NCAA Tournament and play well against whoever your match-up is, and that will be critical for us to do.

Q. Coach, it seemed like Texas was doing a good job of clogging the lane in the first half and in the second half even with the attention on Ayoka Lee. What was the adjustment like to get the guards and open the lanes for her?

JEFF MITTIE: We were standing around way too much offensively. The dribble was -- we were really -- that was the thing that -- we didn't want to make a lot of hard cuts and Texas does a good job of being physical, so it's not going to be a -- it's not going to be a 5-on-0 cut. You've got to be physical. We just seemed to be standing around. I thought early, I thought Bry and Jae were standing too much. Actually I thought all the guards were standing too much. Gabby said it, this is not what we talked about in our flow offense.

We wanted to back-cut more, we wanted to get more seven cuts against them, because they like to hedge. I think what you saw in the second half was us pushing tempo and us getting more cutting, which got the ball moving, and I thought Lee did a fantastic job of being able to post-up without us having to call plays every trip.

Because you can call plays for Lee every trip, but then Texas has the opportunity to organize their help side, organize where that's coming from. Second half much better ball movement, much better player movement.

Q. Jeff, tremendous team, you've been through the battles this year. What kind of luxury is it to know that you don't have to worry about the mind-set of your women on this team right now and just the fact that you know they're going to come back, get back to work and be ready for the tournament?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, it's great. I mean, that part has been great all year. This has been one of my favorite teams to

coach. Right now the disappointment of losing today is pretty fresh. You know, I'll appreciate it later, but now -- you know, now we're -- I'm sure, getting on that bus and getting back to the hotel this is going to be a team that's really disappointed that they don't have the opportunity to play tomorrow.

We know we're going to get to play down the road but we're not going to get to play tomorrow. There is going to be a championship game tomorrow night and we fell a little bit short. That's hard to swallow right now.

Q. After the Texas Tech game and these two games here do you feel like you guys have maybe turned a corner a little bit and got ten back to what you were doing earlier in the year?

JEFF MITTIE: I don't think there is any doubt. Anybody that watched these games, I don't think there is any doubt. We got a 25-point road win, which doesn't happen very often in the Big 12, we beat an outstanding West Virginia team, and we went wire-to-wire here, got down early obviously, so maybe not wire-to-wire but we went toe-to-toe forty minutes here and none of it was easy for either team.

I don't think there is any doubt, Lee is as close -- I said this coming in. You know this, we said this last week. This is as healthy as we've been. Health isn't just the games, it's her being able to practice. It's her being able to do the things. She wasn't able to practice at any point during the regular season. We were just resting her for games after the injury. She was finally able to practice full coming into this tournament, and so I feel like we're as healthy approximately physically as we can be and feel like we have got ten back to playing really, really solid basketball.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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