

Golden State Valkyries

Media Conference

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Ohemaa Nyanin

Natalie Nakase

Media Conference



ownership, Joe Lacob. I'm like, wow, look how happy they are, and they're not just winning. Look at the joy that they're having.

I just remember telling myself, like, I want to work for Golden State. I want to be a part of that.

Fast forward, nine years later, I'm here in Golden State, and I'm just living proof that when you work really, really hard and you stay focused on your goal that big dreams do come true.

Thank you, Joe. Thank you, Brandon. Thank you, Kirk. Thank you, Jess. Thank you, Ohemaa. Thank you, Kimberly. Thank you, Vanja. Everyone who was involved in the hiring process, thank you for this opportunity and thank you for entrusting me in leading the Golden State Valkyries. I really appreciate it.

I understand the expectations here. You've made it really clear. My first conversation with Joe, sitting there having some lunch, and he's just so passionate, and he's full of energy, and basically the first 10, 15 minutes he's telling me, I'm about achieving goals. I'm like, yeah, I know. He's just like, so what I do is, he's like, I set my goal really, really high, and then I create a plan, and then he's like, I just work obsessively towards that plan over and over again until I get that goal, and I'm like, yeah.

Towards the end of our conversation, he's like, in about five years, we're going to have to win a championship, and I was like, hell yeah, we're going to win a championship. I wanted to, just because of his passion and his energy and also his belief.

So then he went on and said, look, I'm going to provide the Valkyries with the best practice facility in Oakland. It's going to have 17 baskets, two courts going this way, one court going that way with the weight room, recovery room. It's going to be your own space. I was like, great.

Then he said, in the Chase Center, we're going to have your own locker room. It's going to be your own -- I'm like, whoa, whoa, we're playing in the Chase Center? Like, oh, my gosh. I remember sitting there thinking, he's setting me

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everybody. Great to see you. On behalf of the Valkyries, I want to thank you for joining us on what will be a historic day in the franchise's history. It was just over a year ago that the WNBA awarded Golden State with the 13th WNBA expansion franchise and there's been a lot of momentum growth since then.

You probably recently saw the news about the 18,000 season ticket deposits. That's a record-breaking metric. No other U.S. women's professional sports team has seen numbers like that, so I think the data and the growth speaks for itself that northern California is ready for a WNBA franchise.

Golden State, as you know, does not have any players yet. The Valkyries don't have any players yet or a head coach - yet - but that is why we're all here, so for more on that I'd like to introduce Valkyries general manager Ohemaa Nyanin.

OHEMAA NYANIN: Good morning. Thank you so much. It's another great day in the history of the Valkyries. Mr. Joe and the ownership group gave me a blank canvas to create a championship caliber roster and staff. Since then, I've hired Vanja Cernivec as my VP of ops, who most recently was the GM of the London Lions and won the 2024 Euro Cup.

Today I'm proud to announce that we're adding yet another component to this canvas, our first head coach in Valkyries history, Natalie Nakase.

NATALIE NAKASE: Thank you, Ohemaa, number one, for believing in me, and thank you for this opportunity.

Before I get started, though, I do want to get you guys in on a little secret. It was 2015, and it was my third year in the NBA working for the Clippers, and I was watching the Finals and I'm looking up at the screen, and Golden State Warriors win a championship under new leadership, new



up for success. I can't fail in this situation because he's just providing me with so many great resources.

I just remember leaving our conversation, and I never told you this, but I was like, I want to work for Joe. Like that's who I want to work for, and not only that, I want to bring home that first championship for him.

I just want to thank you, Joe, because that conversation as much as maybe you just thought it was just a lunch or whatever, that impacted me in so many positive ways. I just want to thank you.

I want to thank the Las Vegas Aces. Head coach, close friend of mine, Becky Hammon, a mentor, and our president Nikki Fargas and also Mark Davis, one of the best sports owners I've worked for, and what Las Vegas taught me was they taught me how to win. We won back-to-back championships in our first two years, and that's special.

The reason why we won was because Becky Hammon just has a really big heart and she created such a loving and caring environment from the jump. So we just had that initial buy-in from the start.

I will forever be grateful for them. Once you win a championship, as you guys know, you're family for life. I'm just grateful that I'll always have them in my corner.

Lastly, I want to thank my family. My sister Nicole, my mom, they couldn't be here today, but my sister Nori, my nephew sitting right here, and I just want to thank you guys for always picking me up, and for those that just don't know my background, my dad was always my first phone call, whether it was like life or basketball. That was my first phone call. Thank you guys for always picking up my calls because I wouldn't be here today, and just your love and support, I would not be here today. I appreciate you guys.

Lastly, just to the organization, I'm going to pour all my energy and heart and soul into this organization, and I just can't wait to build a championship team because that's what the fan base here deserves.

OHEMAA NYANIN: You can see why I hired her. I'd like to take a moment to talk about the hiring process and also why Natalie. The hiring process started right after I stepped off this podium about five months ago. The hiring committee was amazing. I'm really grateful and thankful for the time that they spent helping me put this together.

The search included coaches from the international, collegiate and professional landscapes, and our approach was robust and expansive. It was critical to ensure that we

took our time and due diligence in making sure we made the right hire for the franchise, for our athletes, and for our fans.

I was blown away by all of the inquiries that we got. Every social media platform I got, hey, I'm going to be your next head coach, and I was just really grateful that people wanted to come and be a part of our franchise.

We were looking for a leader that understood the opportunity that this expansion team has to impact the league. I was looking for a person, Mr. Joe and I were looking for a person that leads with empathy, humility, and inclusivity, someone who embraces the opportunity to build with myself and Mr. Joe, someone who had competitive grit, grind, and then also somebody who was purpose driven.

So why Natalie? She is extremely driven. Started her career as a walk-on and turned starter at UCLA. That approach started her in her path to greatness. She's a unifier. Through the interview process she had to focus on surrounding herself with a diverse coaching staff that would be able to develop and maintain trust for all of our future athletes. She's a poised, hard worker, as she's already described. She started coaching in 2008 in Germany and then Japan before working with the Clippers for a decade and most recently, as she has thanked, the Las Vegas Aces.

The last thing that I want to say is that she's inquisitive. She loves to ask questions about how and why things are happening, which I think is an important trait for building something from scratch.

I'd love to hand it off to you, Laura, and also just to highlight that I'm really proud and this organization is very proud to announce, from my research, I'm still researching to make sure I have this right, the first Asian-American female head coach in WNBA history.

THE MODERATOR: We've got a quick Q & A that I'll do up here and then we'll open it up to questions. Let's start with that conversation that you had with Joe Lacob. The idea and the goal is to win a championship within the first five years of this franchise, what do you like about that challenge? I'll pose this to both of you.

NATALIE NAKASE: I just like the challenge that he wants to be No. 1. That's what sports is about. That's the beauty of sports is that you want to be No. 1. You want to be a champion. No one kind of goes back and be like, well, in five years I want to be No. 2. Nobody remembers the second place. Everyone remembers the champion. That's what drives me is, again, like my dad taught me when I

was young, you've always got to be the best. So I almost feel like he has trained me in a way or he's raised me to be where I am today.

Can't wait to get to work. Obviously this is day one. But just ready to get to work and start achieving that goal.

THE MODERATOR: Ohemaa, that is a lofty goal. What excites you about the challenge?

OHEMAA NYANIN: It excites me because I get to work with amazing elite humans that have come from all walks of life, all experiences. We're going to do it right, and we're going to do it -- we have no other excuse but to do it, and we've been given the resources to do it. Now we just -- it has to happen.

THE MODERATOR: There's obviously a lot of success within this organization with what the Warriors have done on the court. Are there any pressures with now transferring that over to the WNBA? How does that feel for you?

NATALIE NAKASE: No, I don't think there's any pressure. I think actually pressure is just a mindset. It's just in your mind.

Again, I see it as a challenge, like you just said. You always want to be No. 1. I think it's kind of neat, yes, we don't have any players right now, but when we do get our players, I'm a big believer that confidence is key with anything, and that any day since the goal is a championship, that we're going to walk into practice and we're going to work hard every single day, and every single day their confidence just going to grow and grow and grow, and to me that's one of the coolest things in being a coach, now a head coach. I love seeing that confidence go from here and then in a month go from there.

Yeah, I'm just excited just because I'm a pusher, and I just enjoy doing that. Again, that's just going to be, I think, key to winning a championship down the line.

THE MODERATOR: As far as the record viewership we're seeing in the WNBA, the metrics business-wise are all around -- I'm sure many of you have seen the headlines across newspapers, digital papers, whatever you want to call it, Twitter, X, whatever you want to call it. What excites you most about where the WNBA is headed, Ohemaa?

OHEMAA NYANIN: The growth is just limitless. What we've seen from the past five years from when I've been in the league to where we are today, and as you mentioned, where we are today means that we can kind of grow to anywhere, and we're going to continue to grow. I'm just

super excited about it.

THE MODERATOR: What's unique about this time in WNBA history right now, Natalie?

NATALIE NAKASE: I think what you're seeing, like what Joe is doing, is he's creating our own practice facility. I had that with the Las Vegas Aces, and no matter what anyone is going to say, that is a huge advantage. To have your own space where you can go 24/7 or where you can go to recover, that is such an advantage.

Eventually what people are not really talking about is the off-season. Most players go overseas, but if we ever can get to a point to where we can keep our players in house, now in the off-season instead of six months going somewhere else and learning a new defense and a new offense, let's keep them in house. We have our own practice facility, so let's keep them in house so they can continue to learn our philosophy. That's going to be big for me because we're an expansion team. The sooner we can get the players in, the better.

I think when you do that, now our product is going to be better because the players are not learning two completely different philosophies. So that's where I think the league is headed, is if everyone gets on board with the practice facility, you're going to see this product grow.

THE MODERATOR: Ohemaa, the expansion draft has been announced. No players yet; what's the process like for you, and what are your initial priorities in building the Valkyries?

OHEMAA NYANIN: Yeah, the process started five months ago, right, being able to scout, Vanja and I have put together a really robust plan, and now we get to show our plan to our head coach and say, what are your thoughts. Very excited to talk to her about her philosophy, what she's looking for in each of the different positions, and then from there we have a little bit more time until December 6, and we're just going to continue to put our processes in place.

THE MODERATOR: What kind of team do you want to build?

NATALIE NAKASE: Competitive. That's No. 1. We've got to be able to compete. You have to love winning, and you have to hate losing. If losing doesn't hurt you or you don't feel it, you're not going to do well in the Valkyries' system. Secondly, you've got to be selfless. I want to see that ball moving.

I think, again, Golden State has carried a standard of winning, but just with their pace and the ball movement,



because I just think ball movement is unguardable.

Lastly, I've been saying a million times, you've got to work. You really have to work. If you're trying to now beat established teams like New York Liberty and Minnesota, we have to work just to be able to get to that level in a couple years.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you both. Let's open it up to questions.

Q. Could you talk about what you can take from the Aces and their success and specifically apply it here? Obviously that was basically an All-Star squad, and had a head start, was not an expansion team, but what lessons do you take from what you did with Becky?

NATALIE NAKASE: How much time do you have?

THE MODERATOR: We've got about 15 minutes.

NATALIE NAKASE: Becky Hammon, the X's and O's, it's high level, so I don't even need to go there with that. But I think I just touched on it. Becky Hammon has the biggest heart that I've ever been around as a coach. For me at the time, she took me in the year my dad passed, and so I remember her just having one conversation with her on the phone, and we talked X's and O's and we didn't even know each other prior to me joining the Las Vegas Aces. We were acquaintances, we were opponents, and yeah, whatever, but nothing super close.

I remember her asking me the question of how are you doing as a person, and I just completely broke down because no one has ever asked me that, and I just remember, like, I really want to work for someone where I'm going to feel comfortable and I'm going to feel love and care in that environment. That's what she did, from day one in training camp she opened her heart, she made everyone feel comfortable and be their authentic self, and that's why we got that buy in, no matter -- we had All-Stars, this and that, but the buy-in was so quick that that's why I think a huge reason why we won right away in our first year, because we didn't know each other. We didn't know the players. So when you have that, you have to come together quickly.

So that's what I'll take is I'm just going to coach with my heart. I'm going to be open. I'm going to be caring. I'm just going to be there for the players.

Q. Ohemaa, you mentioned you and Vanja were going to come up with this plan and present it to Natalie and it's this work in process. What is the identity that you've been trying to establish in bringing in Natalie,

bringing in Vanja before you even have players to go and you're going to enter the player acquisition process? What is the identity you wanted to present when you start that process?

OHEMAA NYANIN: Yeah, I think the majority of the identity is to embrace the unknown. We are the first expansion team since 2008. There's a lot that is ahead of us. I think embracing the understanding that adversity is an opportunity to learn, and if we lead with our experiences and an open heart, there's nothing that we can't achieve.

Q. Natalie, in terms of keeping players local in the off-season, how close do you think the league is and this team is to getting to that reality, and what factors might be preventing it? Is it just contingent on paying players enough that they don't need to go overseas?

NATALIE NAKASE: I think that's an individual player question just because the salaries range so differently, and actually what the player needs and their life style at that time. We have players from all different walks of life, so I can't really speak for the individual player. But I think we're close. A lot of our players stayed back last year. They now have that new league in Miami, so I think that's also going to help because the pay, I think, is -- six of the Aces are playing, so I'm sure there's enough money for them to stay.

I think leagues like that really help, and again, practice facilities. That's huge. I think we're very close.

Q. Talk about how much it means to you to be the first Asian American coach in the league.

NATALIE NAKASE: It means a lot. I'm going to start crying. I mentioned this before when I met the Warriors' staff. I just fell in love with the sport when I was six. My dad raised me. He has so much passion for basketball. All I knew was playing basketball every single day because he played, and then he made three girls, had three daughters. He made us play every single day. So that's all we knew.

Because he was passionate about the sport, I became passionate about the sport. As I grew up and was like, oh, I'm pretty good at this, I had some success, I ended up playing at UCLA, and at the time you don't really think and look around like what am I doing, especially when you're 18, 19, 20 years old.

As I got older and I ended up coaching for a men's professional team in Japan, and I guess I was the first woman to ever do that, and I remember after games there would be a ton of women just surrounding me after games

and just saying, "thank you," and "arigato" and I'm like, okay, cool, but we lost, too. I'm like, why are you saying that after we lost.

Just a little history, in Japan men are considered up here where women are a little bit more submissive, so for them it was really powerful to see a woman in that position yelling at refs, trying to get a technical. I just remember this one woman, she would come every single time, she was so cute, she would bring me treats and things, and she just said something in Japanese, and I asked my translator, what did she just said, and she said, you're my hero, and I was like -- she was older than me. I'm like, how can I be someone's hero. It just completely took me away.

Now I get it. I do understand it's my responsibility, not only to be the first but to set a good example and push as hard as I can. That's why I'm kind of obsessed with winning and winning a lot of championships, because that's why I want to set the standard with it.

Q. Natalie, expansion franchises typically require a little bit of patience and it's a process building from the ground up, but also it's no secret you've got this ultra competitiveness. How do you plan to balance that as a head coach when you're getting things going, don't know who your roster is yet and just kind of take this in stride?

NATALIE NAKASE: I mean, I don't ever slow down, and I think that's why you see us in leadership positions. We have a lot of enthusiasm. We're motivated. So number one, that won't slow down. But I think that's only going to draw attention to the right players.

At the same time, yeah, we're going to choose 12 players, but the right players are going to want to come to a winning culture. Winners attract winners. So whoever we end up choosing, they're telling me what type of players I want. They're going to be attracted to this organization.

Hey, I didn't really answer your question other than we're going to compete and then every year we're going to get better and better. But like Joe said, the goal is a championship, so we've got to bring a championship home.

Q. Natalie, you mentioned a little while ago about this is a dream come true, so I wanted to ask you what would little Natalie think about this moment?

NATALIE NAKASE: That she's crazy. Yeah, I mean, I just, again, played basketball every day just because I actually thought that was what I was supposed to do when I was young. Like I said, we really didn't have a choice, but I just fell in love with it.

Yeah, I think crazy would be the word.

Q. Natalie, just was curious, you mentioned the practice facility as a big factor, but in what other ways have you seen Golden State and the Valkyries separate themselves from other teams in the league or put themselves on par with the top echelon of franchises even as a new one?

NATALIE NAKASE: That's a good question. I mentioned this earlier, so just a quick story. When I worked in the NBA, I worked for the Los Angeles Clippers, and again, 2015, Golden State wins the championship; 2017, Golden State wins the championship; 2018 -- I'm sitting here in LA going, why are they always winning. There's obviously some type of secret that they have. Yeah, they have players and they like to have fun, and that was our goal, too, was to have players who like to have fun and just team chemistry.

After they won the third one, I was like, all right, I'm just going to ask somebody -- I just remember, oh, I'm just going to ask somebody. I'm going to go to the source. I'm going to ask somebody at Golden State, one of the coaches, and at the time Willie Green was one of your coaches, and Willie Green played for us my first year when I did video.

So when I ran into him in Summer League, I was like, Willie, why do you guys win all the time. He's like, is that a serious question, and I'm like, yeah, it's a serious question. He's like, I'm just going to keep it simple, and he's like, you're going to be shocked, and I'm like, well, what is it. He's like, Joe only hires great people, and I'm like, no, that can't be it. He's like, no, Joe only hires great people.

I'm like, wow. I'm like, as simple as that sounds, I'm like, oh, I get it. Then fast forward, I win two championships with the Las Vegas Aces, and guess what, our staff is full of great, great people. So that matters. The people matter.

When you're surrounded by great people, she's not going to let me fail, and if I do have a bad day or I make a mistake, which I'm going to make some mistakes, but she's going to be there to help me. She's going to hold me accountable or lift me up when I have a bad day, and that's the importance, and that's really, like, why I wanted to work for Golden State.

Q. Coach, I have a question in regards to your coaching tree. How do you plan to develop that coaching tree under your leadership, and what qualities do you look into for your staff to help them

grow into future head coaches like yourself?

NATALIE NAKASE: That's a good question. Well, since today is like day one for me, I haven't really dug a deep coaching list right now, but I do have a couple people in mind but I want to take my time because obviously to me, the same way Becky Hammon hired her staff, I'm going to take some time. Like I've kind of been saying, hiring genuine people to me is going to be the key. Everyone on my staff is going to have a genuine heart, again, because when our players are struggling, sometimes, too, it's not about, hey, I can fix it, I can fix it. Sometimes as a genuine leader, and this is what I learned with one of my mentors in LA is sometimes -- say you have a bad game. You just have to sit in the mud with them sometimes. Sometimes I'll just -- if you have a bad game, then I'll just sit there. Whatever she wants to say to me, whatever things she wants to mention -- she might not want to talk about basketball. That might not be the problem. It could be something outside. I'm just going to sit here and listen. That's the key, I think, with hiring a staff, is that you've got to have a genuine heart to lead.

Q. I know around the league you're known for working players out pregame. You guys have such intense workouts pregame. Will you miss working out players pregame or are there still plans to do that? The second one is what was your reaction or what was A'ja and KP's and Jackie's reaction, some of the Aces you became really close with when you told them the news of your departure?

NATALIE NAKASE: Well, for pregame, I am getting older, so this body is not moving like it used to back in college. I probably won't miss the pregame. But I will be on the court with our players. Like I'm all about sweat equity, so in our off-season or even in practice, even they ain't doing their defensive slides or if they ain't rebounding, I'll be in the mix with them. But yeah, I won't miss pregame.

The second one is I forgot to mention the players. Last night, I FaceTimed all the players, and instead of going through all of them, let me just hit a couple of them. A'ja, she cried and she made me cry, and we just talked about our relationship and how much it meant to each other, to be in each other's lives, but more importantly what I told A'ja was to continue to shine, continue to be authentic, and for me she's a role model because she is so unapologetic to being her true self.

When people see coaches, okay, you guys are leading and you guys teach the players, no, it was actually a little bit reversed when I was with the Las Vegas Aces, and A'ja just gave speech after speech, and obviously she got into the lights obviously and the cameras a little bit more, but

just the way she held herself through it was something that I'm going to take as I move forward as a leader and just be unapologetically herself. I am forever grateful to have coached A'ja.

Now, Sydney Colson, for all of you guys that know Sydney Colson, just a great human being because she's going to shoot it straight. So I thanked her. I let her know how much she impacted me as a person and how she pushed me. But at the end she was like, well, all great things have to come to an end, right, gnat? I'm just like, okay, where everyone else was crying and just saying I love you.

Yeah, I'm just going to miss every single player that I've coached with the Aces, and forever they will be my family.

Q. Natalie, you mentioned the Warriors a couple times. I know you're a separate entity but have you met Steve Kerr? Will you be picking his brain? How much does that energy of what has gone on in this building, the legacy that has been created with that franchise do you think will influence what you're able to do?

NATALIE NAKASE: Oh, yeah, I've met Steve. Well, I've known him before, obviously, through the NBA and then I just ran into him in the hallway, and I would be a fool if I don't pick his brain. Like I said, I want it to work here.

Anytime I'm sure -- I don't want to interrupt his season, but anytime I would love to pick his brain and also maybe sit in on practice and kind of see how different coaches teach because it's not just about what you know. It's about how you get your players to buy in and what that communication looks like.

I'm just really excited, and again, like with the legacy of the winning and the championships, that's where I want to be. This is a place where I've always strived to be because I've always wanted to be the best.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone, for being here on behalf of the Valkyries for an important day in the franchise's history.

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