

WNBA Media Conference

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Nneka Ogwumike

Katie Smith

Ticha Penicheiro

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have now been joined by Coach Katie Smith, Ticha Penicheiro, and Nneka Ogwumike.

Q. Nneka, this question is for you: When Candace left L.A., she talked about the desire to bring the Chicago Sky to this exact moment. I wonder from your perspective what kind of emotions you have looking at her, having been able to do that? Obviously, there's still three wins that need to happen in order for the championship to come to Chicago.

NNEKA OGWUMIKE: I'm proud. I'm very proud of her. It's been awesome seeing her being, obviously, received at home, and for her to be able to make it through the season. I know for her it's meaningful that she made it through relatively healthy and for them to be playing their best basketball right now and be in this position, it's exactly what she wanted to do. Usually when Candace says she's going to do something, she does everything to make it happen.

I'm very proud of where she's landed, and I'm excited to be able to watch her today.

Q. One quick follow-up. The team has spoken about how her leadership has carried them through really adverse moments this season. Obviously finishing 16-16 wasn't the expectation. As her former teammate, what is it about her leadership that allows her to carry teams that way?

NNEKA OGWUMIKE: It's the passion. It's the passion behind it. I think all of us can even see when she plays that she's invested, very much so. She wants to leave it all out on the court.

So I think that her bringing that passion is kind of maybe providing a heartbeat for Chicago that they may not have had before in the way that she brings it. I'm excited to see everyone being able to experience that on that team and in

that organization.

Q. Ticha, I'll start with you. Sloat [Courtney Vandersloot] if anybody can, I guess, critique how great a point guard she is, it would be you. What are some of the thoughts you have about the way her game has grown, the things she's able to do out there on the court and getting to the Finals again, leading her team to the finals again.

TICHA PENICHEIRO: I was able to be Sloat's [Courtney's] teammate in 2012 when I was in Chicago. She was a baby then, right? But everybody could see the potential, even when she was playing in college for Gonzaga.

I'm not surprised the way she makes the teammates better, the way she plays the game, the way she passes, and when she needs to, she can score as well. I'm not surprised we're talking about Sloat as probably the top five point guards in the history of this league, and I'm extremely proud of her.

I think Candace -- and she's probably the first person that says she's not the best leader vocally that she can be, but she's somebody that's super competitive. She always did it by just practicing hard and playing hard and by example, and now she has Candace take that load a little bit off of her, and she can just be free to play basketball.

Q. Nneka, this is a first full season for Cathy [WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert] outside of the bubble. There were so many things that went on this year too and things that you continue to work on as president of the executive committee. What's your sort of assessment on how this season went? And what are maybe the biggest one or two things that you're hoping we're going to see you next year, if you will?

NNEKA OGWUMIKE: I think this season -- it's funny. I was having this conversation with a few of the league staffers. The season was long. It was long, but in a good way. I think there was a lot going on.

Of course, it started with us trying to figure out what the season would look like coming off of a bubble, and then of course a very active free agency season, and that leading up until just training camp and games. We had our first ever Commissioner's Cup, which was awesome. The



Olympics happened.

Now we're in The Finals, and I just think that right now we're at a point -- we're kind of like on the cusp of really revving things up when it comes to league investment. I think Cathy is doing a great job of stirring that pot and really trying to get results because I know Cathy's all about, obviously, results and getting things done, but through the process, I think she's also -- I know I've been able to develop a really great relationship with her and of course with Terri and the executive director and the executive committee. It's just been great.

I think I look forward to mostly -- I will say this. One thing that I think was really successful was the safety of our season in a pandemic. I think that was something we can be very proud of. It was certainly a journey, and it was all hands on deck, whether it was players, coaches, organizations, the league, everything.

So, I know we're probably -- not even probably, we have no choice but to maintain that moving forward. I really look forward to continuing the conversation around traveling for the players, and not just the players, but the teams. That all plays into safety.

Ultimately too with this new CBA, we're going to see more games in the season, so I look forward as well to having healthy players on healthy teams because we say it every year, but we're still in this season. It's just tough playing games with a handful of players. I know the league wants us to be able to be healthy, and the teams certainly do so that we can play the best basketball that we can.

Q. This question actually is for you, Katie. When you think about the way in which your coaching career has developed and opportunities, there have been more and more opportunities for women to be coaching men, and I wonder whether you think about the way in which your career develops differently than you might have three and four and five years ago in part because of that.

KATIE SMITH: Developed, obviously, we come up through our ranks and take things and learn things from people we come in contact with and play with and play under. But you're right.

When I was in New York with the crossover, obviously Becky [Hammon] was the first, and Jenny Bousek obviously branched off and now these others. So, I do think there's an avenue for us in the NBA, and it's being cultivated. Again, it's a little slow, but it's happening.

Yeah, I think there is a place for us. I think the relationship

that we have with the NBA and the players and coaches, I think it's starting to get better and better of where we stay connected.

Yeah, I think we continue to work together. Even on the Timberwolves, we have Ashley McGee who's the video coordinator with the Timberwolves and also with ourselves. So, I just think it's a slower process, but it's starting to be looked at in, I guess, the men's side is starting to really try to add that piece.

But I think we always, whether we had jobs over there or not, we're always learning and know. Basketball is basketball. It's not a foreign thing for women or men. Obviously, the men are on our side, and we could be on their side.

Q. If I could follow up, Nneka, with you, what do you think that means for your generation of players as some period of time down the road those opportunities are going to be available for those of you who want to go into coaching?

NNEKA OGWUMIKE: I was actually literally just having this conversation with Swin [Cash]. I think it's less about whose side you're on versus what opportunities are available. I think it's something that's important for our league as well. As we continue to grow and as the NBA is established, it's not only basketball leagues that are experiencing women being involved on both sides.

It's not limited to coaching either. I think what's important is that, if the opportunity is available, players feel they may be pigeonholed into coaching, not saying that coaching is a bad thing, but sometimes they don't know what to do and then they fall into it. We want to make sure that the best people are in the best positions.

So as these opportunities arise, you have coaching, you have analytics, you have GMs, you have presidents, you have referees, and it's important for these players to understand that these opportunities are available and that you have coaches like Katie who can show them the way and help them figure out exactly where their path can find them as they figure out what they want to do post basketball.

I think it's fantastic that it's happening in all leagues. And I think something that's important too is that when these positions open up, especially in coaching, on men's leagues for women, we're learning a lot, but I think it's also imperative for people to understand that they can learn a lot from us as well.

Q. Ticha, you mentioned that you played with



. . . when all is said, we're done.®

Courtney Vandersloot back in 2012. I'm just curious from where she was at back then and where she is now, what's been the biggest improvement why her game as one of the best facilitators in this game?

TICHA PENICHEIRO: I think consistency. I think it comes with age and experience, and I just feel that every time she gets on the court, she does what she needs to do. She knows her job. She knows what a point guard is supposed to do, and she gets her teammates involved, and she calls their name and number when she's supposed to, but I think her consistency, how consistent she's been throughout the whole season.

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