

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 5, 2021

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Texas A&M Aggies

Gary Blair

Postgame Press Conference



Texas A&M 77, LSU 58

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to continue with Coach Gary Blair.

Q. I know LSU is the one team that gave you your only loss this year. To come out today and beat them in the SEC tournament, do you feel you have vindicated and got a little revenge for the game earlier this year?

GARY BLAIR: Hopefully we did. Both teams were at full strength. Give LSU a lot of credit. I thought they played their best game of the year the game before us against Mississippi State. They were just coming off of five losses. I think they're still an NCAA team.

When you got somebody as good as Pointer and Aifuwa out there, that says a lot about our league. But I think Nikki has done everything she can with this team. Yesterday's game against Mississippi State, I mean, I didn't sleep at all last night just thinking how could we beat it.

But I think the last basket before the end of the quarter when we were up 13-12, that gave us -- because we couldn't have shot any worse than what we did, but I thought that gave us a boost. I thought we dissected their zone pretty well in the second and third quarter. Man-to-man stuff, we're pretty good at running our stuff against man-to-man.

Give LSU a lot of credit. It's hard coming back and playing 24 hours later. But our kids played well, and again played with that savvy you have to have in the second and the third quarter, which we did.

Q. You mentioned the second and third quarters. Do you feel your team progressively got better by quarter as this game went on?

GARY BLAIR: By quarter and by point guard play. Everything always you look back to the point guard play.

Yeah, we struggled a little with some of our turnovers. It doesn't matter how we preach to them about throwing cross-court passes, we still managed to do it. But the smarter we got, the more we started driving the ball.

I knew our legs would not be as good. We wanted to drive the ball against their matchup zone or man-to-man. Then obviously when Morris came in the ballgame in the second quarter, that sped us up. It could have been McKinzie Green, could have been Jordan. This time we needed Jordan. It was a great call by Coach Bond to put her in at the time.

We got those two easy baskets from her, then her confidence was sky high. She was able to complete the job in the third and fourth quarter.

Q. How huge was it having bench players like Alexis Morris come off the bench and pour in 13 points? What does this say about this team's depth?

GARY BLAIR: Well, some of you do not remember, she won a national championship two years ago at Baylor as a starting point guard at the end of the season. So she knows what it's all about and she's been great to come in and wait her turn and earn her turn, because green and Nixon have both played very well this year.

So people seem to forget about that. She's already won a national championship. She'd like to have another one. It's going to be fun the next few years knowing our point guards are all back because we can share.

Our bench was tremendous. We didn't give Pitts the shots she needed in the first half, but she hit a big three later when we reversed the ball to her. Zaay Green came in, another kid that's been playing on a pretty good team at Tennessee. She came in and she has just fit into you're team like a glove. I cannot wait for next year.

Think about what Wilson and Wells did today, my W girls. I said, Drive the ball. She got to the free-throw line 12 times.

Normally she's going to hit 11 out of 12. It just didn't go in. But she drove the ball, which was very good.

Wilson had 15 rebounds. We didn't need her offense as much, but her rebounds, two blocked shots. This team will do whatever it takes. If it isn't their night, they'll defer and find another way to help the team.

We wanted to go to Ciera Johnson early. Her first move she made in there, the little baby hook, we kept telling her, That's your shot, get there, use it. She had a very solid game as well.

Q. I think it goes without saying, but N'dea Jones so disruptive on blocking their shots, loose balls, rebounds. Seems like she's always the spark plug for you guys.

GARY BLAIR: Don't forget the charges. I think she either took two or three, and some were not called. But she throws her body in there so much, she does such a great job whatever the team needs.

We got a little bit of foul trouble, but that was what both teams were trying to do, drive the ball. But we were forcing their misses. I just think she just keeps backing game after game after game. I think she's an All-American. Just give her a lot of credit. She brings it every night.

God, it's good to have her.

Q. Did you have any concern at all that this team wouldn't be ready and sharp after the big moment that you had Sunday in beating the Gamecocks?

GARY BLAIR: I think we showed that in the first quarter. We were feeling out. Thank heavens they were missing as many shots as we were. It didn't give them momentum at the quarter break. It gave us momentum because we had great shots, particularly underneath, that we just didn't hit due to their size or just us missing it.

You always expect that the team that plays on Thursday and has a good win, they feel -- I've been there before. Upsets happen on Friday. It's the best basketball in the country on Friday in the SEC. Friday in the SEC, because all eight teams should be going to the tournament, and that includes LSU as well. Okay? We've got to do a little lobbying with Charlie back there, but...

We expected the letdown. But when you have a veteran team, we do not panic. We started dissecting them. Coach Bond did a great job of her zone offense. Starkey is always playing the defense. I get to sub in or do something, whatever I do.

This was good for women's basketball. I'm sorry that the normal five to seven to eight thousand are not here to see this in person. But the ones that are here enjoy Greenville because this is a special time and a special town.

New Jersey or New York, you got to be from one of them. Whereabouts?

Q. New York.

GARY BLAIR: I appreciate it (laughter).

Q. This past season you all had a special night where you had a special theme for the players being able to showcase their expressions with their sneakers. How important is that for you throughout this particular season with all that's going onto allow the players to be able to express themselves individually like that with their artwork, their custom sneakers?

GARY BLAIR: I think it's very important. I think it's very important for the coaches, as well. My 'why' is Special Olympics. On my white tennis shoes, I've done a special Olympic tournament for 28 years, Arkansas and A&M. That's our 'why'.

If you could have heard the kids when they were presented the shoes in the practice gym, then he had to get up and talk to each other on why their 'why' was so important, whether it was cancer, losing a loved one, or helping their aunt at home or COVID problems that relatives have had. It was a very emotional time.

I wish it could have been every team in the country has a 'why', why we're playing today. We're doing such a good job in men's and women's basketball. Why are we playing? Because the country needs us right now. They need hope. They need box scores. They need their television so they can get back and second-guess us poor coaches. But they need to enjoy the 18-to 23-year-olds that are going through their why's.

It doesn't hurt for a 75-year-old to have a 'why', as well.

Ciera, we went to an early? It didn't matter that Aifuwa is a great shot-blocker. When she puts her hands to the sky, she's tough. We went to her early. We know N'dea gets hers wherever. But I think that gave the confidence to Ciera that she's going to need going forward whether it is Georgia or Kentucky or whoever comes along. She needed that confidence. She always plays great defense. But I had the bench that I could come in.

Give her a lot of credit. Our shot selection, our



charge-taking. Before the game I said, Whoever leads this game in taking charge is probably going to win it. We might have beat them by one.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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