

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

**Texas A&M Aggies**

**Gary Blair**

**Destiny Pitts**

**Kayla Wells**

Postgame Press Conference

Vanderbilt 85, Texas A&M 69

**GARY BLAIR:** We're in a great city, Nashville. The SEC puts on a great show. I was glad to be able to see how many little third graders that were up in the stands. When we get a chance to teach, that's the best thing we can. Particularly when it's a Wednesday environment and most people have jobs, but hopefully we'll be able to pack this house going forward.

The tournament is always well-run. We didn't play well, but we did give everything that we have, and a lot of that was due to Vanderbilt's game plan was better than ours because they completely took us out of our offense in the first half by their traps and by our attempted 30 to 40 foot passes that most of them were not complete. I thought we hung with them. We beat them fairly comfortable at our place, but they always stuck around. They never gave up, and when you have a young team and a young coach that Vanderbilt has, you know they'll get better as the season goes on. I thought Shea did an excellent job of countering what we wanted to do, but the main thing was we couldn't run our offense until the second half started, and when we had to go into the press and mold that we had to, I thought it showed a lot of fire in our team. We were really so close to being able to have some full-court breakaways, but we never really got those, but we were playing very good pressure defense that Coach Brown put in. We had to give up a couple of easy baskets because we were outnumbered by the time we rotated, but it's Vanderbilt's day to go forward.

I would prefer all the questions about the game itself, you all have seen my career. Okay, it's fine. Let's talk about



the game and the future of these two young ladies up here and us going forward with a game of women's basketball.

**Q. Kayla, what does it mean to you to have had a chance to play for Coach Blair?**

**KAYLA WELLS:** It means a lot. He has taught me a lot on and off the court. Like I always say, off the court he is always going to be there for me. Always going to try to create a lot of opportunities for me, and his knowledge for the game is amazing, and he has just taught me so much, so I'm grateful to be able to be coached by him for five years.

**Q. Destiny, if you want to answer that same question, please.**

**DESTINY PITTS:** I really appreciate Coach Blair taking me in as a transfer and taking a chance on me, and just this whole program and university meant a lot. Just seeing Coach Blair as a role model not only to us girls, but in his community and all along Texas A&M, and a lot of other coaches look up to him. I think he did a really good job with just not teaching stuff on the court, but also life lessons that we can take away after he is done coaching and after we're done playing.

**Q. Kayla, what were some of the life lessons you have learned from Coach Blair?**

**KAYLA WELLS:** Just networking. He always tells us to -- it's the speaking part. This is your interview, so every time you get a chance to speak or to talk to someone, just make sure you make the best out of it because you never know who that person could be to you down the line.

**Q. Destiny, what's one of your favorite memories from Coach Blair?**

**DESTINY PITTS:** (Laughing) I don't know really. It's a lot of memories. I like that at Mizzou he was trying to teach me how to dance. Usually we listen to our music, and it's not really his taste. He doesn't really complain. It's good. We played a song that he was interested in, and I knew that he would know, and he showed me how to dance. It



was memorable for him to take that time out when he could have been more focused on the game plan or something like that.

**Q. You mentioned that Vanderbilt's defense was kind of taking you guys out of your offense. What specifically were they doing, and what role did Jordyn Cambridge, their point guard, play in that?**

GARY BLAIR: Our offense is all about timing, cuts, screens, whatever. We never could get into that, and then I thought we got very shot-happy in the first half, and we were shooting early in a possession. Instead of once we finally broke the press to sit up there and have enough poise to realize we've seen this all year. We're not the most athletic team in the world, but we're a very good shooting team, and I just think we panicked.

They hit some tough shots. We kept thinking we're going to be okay; it never happened. And they were not doing anything that we haven't seen or what they did the first time around.

They just out-executed, and then it's hard to make that comeback. It's like in a horse race. When you are getting beat so bad, you have to find that second gear, and you run up right next to the leader, and you are right there with them neck and neck, and the leader looks over at you, "Is that all you got?"

Then they just took off on that last quarter. Maybe that's why I'm reading that book called Gun Lap right now because this has been my gun lap all year, and I want to be able to do it as well as I've done early in my career, but this was a great team to be able to try to do that gun lap with because of the maturity. I didn't have to depend on a lot of freshmen early in their career. They'll grow up someday, but I was able to have juniors and seniors and grad students that had the maturity to be able to handle this year that we went through. Folks, it is hard doing it this way, but it was best for the school and for women's basketball going forward to do this so-called victory lap.

It's not a lot of fun doing it. I promise you that. At times I wasn't the best husband in the world because I carry too much of my job home at times, and sometimes your preparation on that next opponent is not as good, and that would be the same out in the business world if you were leaving, like my mother left for Public State Bank in her last year, what was that like? Could you be as good in that last year as you were in the prime of your life? This year I wasn't. If I was, we would have a different win-loss record.

The SEC is strong. We won it last year, but the SEC is stronger this year than it was last year. Particularly at the

bottom. The bottom caught up to the middle. Teams like Florida shot up. We have an interim coach taking over in our program in September or August. She's got a good ball club. Shea Ralph coming in. Mulkey at LSU. Howland at Mississippi state. There was a lot of people that had to find their way in a hurry, and we just never could consistently put it together, so no apologies.

I look up above my television every day, and I will ask myself today I gave everything I had, what I've lost, what I kept I've lost forever. That's the way it is in life. How many times do you get up every day and, boy, you're at your best? It might take until noon to be at your best or it might take until 5:00, but that's what I didn't do. That's something that will eat on me for a long time. I wasn't as good when I had to be good. When you had to be good, it's all about teaching and coaching. Not the game itself. I'll get better going forward.

**Q. Gary, when Shea was up here, she said there was a day back early in her assistant career where you sat with her in a high school gym somewhere and nobody knew who she was, and you talked for her about 45 minutes just about the game and coaching and she said I don't even know if Gary would remember that, but I sure do. One, do you remember that? But, two, when you look out at the landscape of women's college basketball and see Shea and some of the young coaches that have come up and kind of idolized you, what does that mean to you?**

GARY BLAIR: It means the world to me. The other night, Sunday night, I was sitting there watching Jim Boeheim at home against Mike Krzyzewski. A 77-year-old playing a 75-year-old, and I'm the 76-year-old. And I met both of them just one time apiece. I'm reflecting back on their careers as much as mine and how the Sheas are moving forward or how my former DOB, Mike Neighbors is doing it at Arkansas. Sometimes you've got to be given that chance, and at Louisiana Tech I was given that chance to be the assistant coach back when there could only be three of us. I had two of the greatest around, just like Shea has had. Chris Dailey, and she said Geno. What an audience that you can be around. I had Leon Barmore and Sonja Hogg. I coached in high school, but I didn't know how to coach or to teach, and that's what you have to do is to step over and get in that pilot's seat and see if you are ready for the opportunity, and a lot of people are not. A lot of people are better assistant coaches than they ever will be as a head coach, but sometimes -- Shea was given that chance. She delivered a home run.

Vanderbilt can be a destination school just like a Stanford is or a Northwestern or a Virginia or a Duke where you have academics that high and women athletes of today

want both. They're not getting ready for the WNBA and going out after a year. They're trying to finally get an MBA where they're at.

She's got a great training ground here. She knows the game. The only thing she hasn't had to do in the last 20 years, she's coached nothing but five-stars and sat in the same living rooms as rock stars. You come to Nashville, Dierks Bentley or Blake Shelton or Loretta Lynn. She's been at the top, and now that experience is showing with her calm demeanor out there and still having a little fire in her because I believe they've lost seven out of eight coming into this ball game, but she don't ever give up. You get better.

So I wish her well going forward, and she'll have this program back at the top 25 level in a couple of years. They'll be there.

**Q. We've got a few questions on Zoom. First question, how much energy did it take out of your team to cut the lead to six in the second half?**

GARY BLAIR: Our bench was alive. I could hear them behind us. I could hear our fans behind us. I could feel the momentum changing, but, like I said, in that horse race, can you get up to them and still complete it? They're not going to hand it to you. They're going to remember how they got it. I think they scored an easy basket to get it to eight, and then a couple of gifts by us, but we were not scoring back. You have got to trade baskets at that time when you are into the type of defense that we were having to play to get back.

Did I answer that question, or did I ramble through as usual?

**Q. I think you answered it. Last question, what was the end of the game like for you today?**

GARY BLAIR: Hurting for my kids. I think that was it. I knew what they had gone through this year, and I couldn't see the score. You couldn't see anything, and I am really thinking about that thing that came out about ten days ago, what Tom Izzo said about shaking hands instead of doing the wave, and he said if we start taking away handshakes after a ball game, or a business meetings or something like that, we've just caved in. Izzo's comment was as good and a little bit I was thinking about that as I was awaiting Shea to finish the celebration and to come over and shake hands with her and her staff. That's how you do it in college athletics, and that's why college athletics is so much better because we're still amateurs, but we are so much better. We do not need college athletics to become professional athletics. There's another league for the pros. College

athletes are for us. Particularly on the women's side, we need to sell more of those stories that kids are doing it well, instead of waiting for the negatives that we write too much about.

Folks, y'all only going to have a couple of inches. Everything should be written about Vanderbilt. It's been a great run. Thank my family. Thank my administration. I thank my basketball team, and all the players.

Last night at 1:00 I got a text from Adaora Elanu. Played in Spain for eight years. She said, Coach, I'm leaving Russia right now on a plane to come home. She had been playing, and I said hopefully you're going to land in the USA, and she said, no, we cannot fly to the USA anymore. We have to go through Turkey to have a chance to be able to come back home. All of a sudden reality just hit us smack in the face. We're just playing a game of basketball. The Elonu are trying to get their daughter back home and her brother is over there playing in Europe as well, but not in Russia, so it makes you appreciate what we have, and now what are we going to do about it? I appreciate all of you all. I'll be out listening to country western music tonight.

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