

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 1, 2023
Greenville, South Carolina, USA
Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Vanderbilt Commodores
Coach Shea Ralph
Ciaja Harbison
Sacha Washington

Postgame Press Conference

Texas A&M 77, Vanderbilt 70

THE MODERATOR: We want to welcome Vanderbilt head coach Shea Ralph and student athletes, Sacha Washington and Ciaja Harbison.

We will begin with an opening statement from the head coach then we will take questions for the student athletes. After that we will dismiss the student athletes and we will take questions for the head coach.

Coach Ralph if you could give us an opening statement?

COACH RALPH: Yes, hi, everyone. First of all, it's an honor to be here at Vanderbilt competing in the SEC. Congratulations to Texas A&M on continuing their season. They played a great game today.

But I'm biased. I am really proud of my team. There has been a ton of adversity thrown at us this year, and I've almost told them not to talk about it because I know there are things we couldn't control, namely injuries, stuff off the court that no one else knows but us.

These players have made me a better person, and they have made me a better coach. They are constantly fighting for themselves, for each other. Their belief and trust in what we're doing and building at Vanderbilt is unlike -- and I've experienced some really great stuff. I mean, I have.

But when you are in the position we are in, it would have been very easy for our locker room to be a tough locker room to walk into every day, but it never was. It was the



best part of my day coming to work and seeing their faces and working with them to get better.

I can't say enough about our senior class and the ways that they contributed, not only to our success on the court, but to the foundation of the excellence that we're building off the court as well.

We're going to be a problem in a good way, very soon. And it's a result -- and will always be a result -- of the teams who have fought us from the beginning.

So while this is the end of our season, this is not the end of our relationship or our growth. These players are going to do some great things. Some of them will be here. Some of them will be in the WNBA and overseas.

But whenever they go, I know they're going to be successful because of what I have experienced with them, the growth they have had and the people they are.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student athletes.

Q. For both of y'all, can you talk about five minutes left in the game, the intensity ramps up; what does Coach say to you? What are you thinking? How do you feel like you executed that last five minutes?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Really I think it's the same story over and over. You have to tell yourself we have to fight. Nothing left in the tank, we gotta give everything we got, play hard, play smart, and plays will work our way.

Ultimately we didn't get the win but we fought and that's all we can really do.

CIAJA HARBISON: To elaborate on that, the fight that we continued to have throughout the game. We never put our heads down; that's never been us. We continued to play Vanderbilt basketball.

We took it possession by possession and executed each possession. I'm proud of the way we finished, regardless of the loss. But, yeah.



Q. Ciaja, you and I spoke about your basketball career. Now that the season is over, can you reflect what this year has meant to your entire collegiate career and, you know, how the conference, being the end of it being this?

CIAJA HARBISON: First off I'm opportunity for opportunity that the Vanderbilt coaching staff gave me to come and be something special for them and the chance to play with wonderful girls, it was an amazing experience going on and off the court, honestly.

They had a lot of freedom with me and developed me in many ways. I'm grateful the whole season, the fight, the determination, the trust they put into me and our teammates. I'm grateful for the experience and they will always be family.

Q. Sacha, put up great numbers tonight; felt like you were just everywhere on the court. What's it like playing a game like this with big stakes?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I tell everybody March is the best time of the year, that feeling of surviving or going home. It's like our trainer said, it was like the Super Bowl. Having a lot of energy, sticking together, playing with my family, like that's what it's all about.

Q. You're a sophomore, and the seasons you have had have been really great. What's the future hold?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Growth, more growth. This staff has trusted me and I trust them, and I know that they will always put me in the best position to succeed. I'm excited for the future and just to grow into a great college player.

Q. Ciaja, the competition that you experienced here, compared to what you had played in before, how can you compare that?

CIAJA HARBISON: I would say it's like playing against pros. These girls are amazing, playing against great competition and fight the whole game. I would definitely say it was tougher, but, honestly, nothing I haven't experienced.

Like I played against an SEC team in A-10 before. Like I know what it's about, and I'm just grateful for the experience to even come out here and be on this big stage and show what I can do alongside my teammates.

So grateful for the experience, like I said.

Q. Sacha, this is your second year in the SEC. In preparation, it doesn't get any easier, would you say?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I mean, like, Ciaja said, we playin' against pros, so to be the best you've got to play against the best. I always love the challenge of coming out here on nights where we get to play against these SEC teams and just them working me and for me to get better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Questions for Coach Ralph.

Q. In a similar vein to the question I had for the players, what can you say about those last five minutes? What did you tell your team? It felt like the intensity went up by ten.

COACH RALPH: Our backs were against the wall. We were down double digits, and five minutes is a long time, though.

When you are a basketball player you want to play with a sense of urgency, but you don't want it to be a panic, right?

So letting them know we have a lot of time left, but every possession matters and we need to turn them over so we can get quick buckets or get to the free throw line.

It wasn't a chance for us at that point to constantly be setting up offense. We were down by too much. In order for us to be in the position to win the game, the first thing we had to do was apply pressure to them where we had a chance to turn them over so we could get quick buckets. That was number one. Number two, when we had quick buckets they had to be high-percentage shots.

So, again, being able to execute on defense and play with a sense of urgency, knowing we had to score quickly but taking a high-percentage shot, I thought we did a good job of that.

We missed some open looks. There was a moving screen called when we hit a three that would have been a good bucket for us. I said this before. I'm not a last five minutes or possession kind of person. Had we played with that sense of urgency the whole game and not necessarily picking up full court and trapping, but just having that sense of urgency, like this possession matters to the success, to the result of the game, then we would have been in a different position at that five minutes.

We may not have ran out of gas in the sense of missing layups or not having to foul and being able to play the game out. Having some timeouts left so I could use them. That honestly has been the story of our year.

You see flashes this year of this team where, holy cow, we just overwhelm people and we are able to do some

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

amazing things in a short period of time. And then there are stretches where we just shoot ourselves in the foot with our lack of discipline, sometimes our lack of focus.

Our fatigue got to us, and we were never able to -- we had a couple of games that were pretty solid from start to finish, but we were never able to put I think forty minutes together where all of our key players played great.

The one time we did it is when we played Texas A&M at home for our first conference win. In the end, like Sacha said, it is about growth. The struggle I have obviously is not -- Ciaja and Marnelle may not get to experience that. We're not going to have them in the locker room. This was it for them.

I don't know when you start to build something, do your younger players understand that, that they're fighting for their survival, like she said, win or go home, but you're also fighting for those who don't have another chance next year, who don't have summer work outs, who don't have another March in college basketball.

That's what it means for our team. We're going to continue working on that. It was important for me in the beginning to talk about how much I was grateful for our seniors, because they had one year with us. Those two could have gone somewhere where they would be playing in the NCAA tournament. For sure.

I told you I thought we would be a NCAA tournament team this year, and they then our injuries happened and they took it in stride. They shouldered our team. You can't say enough about a person who does that. You can't. Not in this day and age.

They made me better, they made us better, and they doubled down on what we were trying to build here. And we will be a great team, but you can't skip steps and you can't skip chapters, and this was one of those chronic crappy chapters the way this year ended for us.

But, you've got to read every line and meet every character, and that's the way it goes. So if we can use this as a positive steppingstone forward and not let ourselves be defined by the results of this year. Whether you look at our record or how it ended, then I think we will be going somewhere special.

Q. Did you feel like the urgency was lacking throughout the game? Priority to the last quarter? Then you talked about how you didn't feel like the pieces fit together for a whole game very often. Was that just because of how small your numbers were, or do you feel like it's a deeper issue?

COACH RALPH: No, yeah, I would never say our numbers. We had eight players that were capable. I think it's everything. As a coach you're trying to figure out a way to inspire your players to be their best, to show up with their best.

So, you know, that would start with me.

But I also think there is just an understanding -- we have a young team as well, so we had some young kids, you know, on our team that played a lot of minutes. We had some veterans who never really played with us before. It's one year.

Then we lost our two best players right off the bat, and our leaders. So it was a constant relearning and meshing. You don't have a lot of time to do that. You're doing it under fire.

I think our effort was good, but we were not able to string it together for long enough in a lot of those games. And in that way, those stretches, just two or three minutes would put us in a position where we couldn't come back in the second half.

We knew it, and we constantly kept working toward it. We just ran out of time. As we continued to get better we ran out of time. I'm proud of them, because, again, they never gave up. These two would tell you they would show up to practice tomorrow if I asked them to to keep working on it.

But we weren't able to figure it out soon enough.

Q. Texas A&M shot well tonight, and better than they usually do. Did that catch ya'll off guard? What was it like responding to that?

COACH RALPH: No. You kind of -- not that you expect it, but that's not the first time that a team has shot a lot better than they usually do against us. It's not something we could control.

I think we could control the open shots we gave them. We gave them way too many open shots, specifically Bowles, who hit several corner three's against our pressure that were back breakers.

So when good teams make shots in March that's not a surprise, but the shots that they take have to be under duress, and that's where we could have made a difference today.

Q. You have reflected on the season and being proud of your team. Is there anything you as a coach feel like



you are going to work on in the off season?

COACH RALPH: How long do you have? I mean, you know, a lot of -- there's been so much great support at Vanderbilt, and every time I go into an interview or an event, there will be talk about me being a first-time head coach. And I am. I am.

This is my first head coaching job, but it's not my first rodeo. I've been part of some amazing teams as a player and a coach. Part of an Olympic gold medal team, part of an WNBA team. I've worked with some of the greatest players that have ever played our game.

I will constantly be learning, and the day that I don't think I need to learn anything I should stop coaching. I think the last two years have taught me my evolution as a coach, while I've done all those great things I have never evolved more than I have the last couple of years. I attribute that a lot to our players because they believe in me. I ask them to show up every day. They show up and they need that from me as well.

So there are no bad days, right? There are challenging ones but there are no bad days when you have that kind of buy-in. And I would have to say my staff is the same.

We intentionally and when I say "we" my husband and I, did this together. He's the associate head coach, but we are partners in this. When we talked about Vanderbilt we talked about hiring an all-star staff.

I believe my staff is the best in the country. There is a process to achieving that. Again, the results, are we champions this year? No. We're not going to win a championship this year. We're No. 12, we're not in the top half but not for long. We will be there. We understand what we're asking our players to do. We do the same thing.

We don't skip steps. We go back to the drawing board. We lean on each other. I have an experienced amazing, passionate, determined staff. You will be seeing a lot of Vanderbilt women's basketball over the next several years, hopefully longer than that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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