

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 3, 2023

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach Mike Neighbors

Saylor Poffenbarger

Samara Spencer

Postgame Press Conference

South Carolina 93, Arkansas 66

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Arkansas head coach Mike Neighbors and student athletes Saylor Poffenbarger and Samara Spencer.

Coach?

COACH NEIGHBORS: You know, from the last time we played them to this time, the improvements we made, really proud. Sam brought it up in the locker room how much we improved, cleaned up areas we were deficient in during the regular season.

Tough environment to play in, a great environment in front of a crowd that is pro South Carolina. I thought for other than just a few little moments we hung in there, battled. We certainly battled the whole time, but it's the best team in the country. I don't think there is any doubt about it.

We have played a lot of the other ones at the top, so to have this type of performance from our kids this time of the year in this environment against that team, we'll fly home with a lot of pride.

Q. Saylor, you led your team in points and assists tonight. Particularly just as a freshman, can you speak about what it means to lead your team and where the future of your game lies?

SAYLOR POFFENBARGER: I think with the team that we have it's kind of hit or miss. I think everyone comes to play, and it's easy to play when you have good people around you. I think that's one thing that we're blessed with,



is we have a lot of really talented players. When one is not having their best game, another one has to pick 'em up, and I think that's been our mentality all year.

You can't have assists without good players, so I think that's just kind of -- it goes back to being able to play with and being surrounded by really good people and players.

Q. Just talk about the game. Seemed like the shots weren't falling. What's the biggest takeaway you can take from this game? Playing the best you could; just shots weren't falling today.

SAMARA SPENCER: I would say we played hard. I feel like we had a lot more grit, a lot more heart. I feel like we just competed more.

Q. When you went down to South Carolina last time the rebounding was out of hand. Talk about how y'all battled on the boards today.

SAYLOR POFFENBARGER: I think rebounding against these guys is a mindset. I think you have to kind of go in telling yourself and coming together as a team and committing to at least trying to rebound.

I think that's one thing we did. We tried as hard as we could, and I think we did everything we could and fought hard against the rebounds. I think that's what you have to do to keep it even.

When we were down there it was obviously uneven. They had a lot of rebounds. But we committed to it today. We decided and it's hard to do. I think when we get some confidence and get some rebounds it just takes us from there and we can kinda keep getting those rebounds.

Q. Samara, one of your teammates yesterday said you never lose confidence when you shoot. Talk about the confidence you had throughout this game.

SAMARA SPENCER: It's all just a mindset honestly. Sometimes when I get down on myself I have people around me who support me. My coaches and teammates around me saying, keep shooting.



So I think having that support system and instilling in me it's okay if I miss because eventually they will fall, I think that's the biggest part.

Q. Yesterday's game, you going down, Mak going down, and Chrissy with her wrist, just talk about the mindset going into today's game and the thought process.

SAMARA SPENCER: We can recover after the game, honestly. It's a tough task to say that we could go out there and beat South Carolina, but our main goal was just for it to be better than last time we played them.

I feel like if we did get an injury or we were hurt or hurting, the mindset was we can get treatment after. We can have that triage session after the game. Fight through it all and get to the end.

Q. Even though you guys were 10 of 34 from the three, was that a matter of them doing a good job defensively or just a matter of the shots not falling?

SAYLOR POFFENBARGER: If you watched the game yesterday Chrissy makes a lot of those shots, so I think that's just -- like I said, we have good players, and sometimes people have off nights. It's our job to pick everyone up. I don't think it was -- they're great defensively, but I think we got a lot of good shots. We got a lot of really great shots we couldn't take back.

If we watched film we wouldn't say, oh, I would have done this differently. I think we got the shots we wanted on our terms, it's just knocking 'em down. I don't think we had bad shots.

Q. I was hoping both of y'all can speak to the leadership of Makayla. Yesterday Coach said so many good things about her and what she brought to the huddle. Where does she bring the team leadership and where has that changed throughout the season?

SAMARA SPENCER: At the beginning of the season it kinda hadn't set in to her that she was one of the oldest people on our team and she had to lead, but over the course of us having ups and downs and our coaches having conversations with us, like, yeah, Mak, you're the leader now. You have to step up.

And also I'm really close with her, so just having those talks with her, like we have to put everything we're facing aside and we have to lead, and you have to lead specifically because you've been here the longest. You need to be leading us.

Just those conversations that I've had with her and knowing that people around her also trust her to lead us, I think that's the biggest thing for her.

SAYLOR POFFENBARGER: I definitely agree. I think Mak is a great leader by example, and I think this year she had to take on a different role of having that voice. Sometimes when you do lead by example you don't always think that you have to speak.

I think for four years Makayla has done a great job of doing everything she needs to do, showing everyone, setting the example, and I think that taking on a different role that's tough and still having to perform to your best, I think that is tough.

But we all want Makayla to lead and we all look to her. I think that was the biggest thing, is our team just -- when you are losing everyone wants to find something wrong, but we didn't have any -- I think that we needed to look within and come out of our shell, and I think that's the biggest difference, was we have a voice, a positive voice, and that's carried us a long ways now.

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

Q. Coach Staley said y'all are in without a doubt in her mind. How are you feeling about your chances?

COACH NEIGHBORS: I love Dawn. She is always out for the league, and I agree with her for this reason. If you look historically, the league who has had the number one overall seed -- like just look at what UCONN does when they go from league to league to league. They always enhanced the value of their league.

She has played us twice, played everybody in the league twice, and so for her to say that means a lot to me and our kids. We have battled. I know it's going to come down -- it's going to be really close. I get that.

But I think how we played today -- we have this thing around our place called facts and film. I got that from a friend of mine, Aaron Rousell, who coaches at Richmond. If we look at the facts and the film, I think we're going to have to be talked about.

I think we've done what we were supposed to do with nonconference, going on the road to some places, not being afraid to do that, not being afraid to challenge ourselves, knowing the league schedule we had that was going to have LSU already on it twice.

I'm not sure how many times we've played South Carolina in this tournament, but it literally seems like every year we play 'em. I'm glad they're in our league. I think a lot of my friends are like, that must stink, but I like that.

That shows you if you can get in this thing, you got a chance to win it. I hope she's right. She's got a powerful voice in our game, and I appreciate her saying that.

Q. Earlier you said South Carolina is the best team in the country this year, but can you stack them across teams you have seen throughout your career? How good is this team?

COACH NEIGHBORS: I've been in it for now this is -- what year is this, 23? I've been in it 23 years. You've got to put them in the conversation with the great UCONN teams. I didn't get to see the great Coach Summitt teams so I can't speak to those, but I would certainly put them in the same line.

I would also compare them to that team they had when they won their other one. Their depth is demoralizing. You can do everything right and they still get it. You're talking about the rebounding a minute ago and the shots. They won't say it up here, but they had a lot to do with our shots not going in.

They don't want to feel like that, but as a coach -- it's different when you have a hand right in your face when you catch it, not after you've shot it. I don't think we took bad shots. I think that's what Saylor was saying. But they make you miss and demoralize you on the board.

Y'all saw the number of times we would be in the right spot. Just couldn't do anything about it. We would make the right basketball play. They would do what we told them to do. I dare anybody in this room trying to guard Cardoso. Anybody was a piece of that? That's what I thought.

And then you got Boston. And I will tell you this: Victoria Saxton has been an All-American against the Arkansas Razorbacks for five years. She is getting a graduation card from us. I think their team is impossible to prepare for. They're impossible to scout.

I don't care what anybody says, Aliyah Boston is the most impactful player in college basketball.

I mean, 19 minutes to do what she did and the way she goes about it and the confidence she gives the other people that come in and the willingness to accept the role she has taken all year long, I would put them in the conversation.

As a big a ranker as I am for things like movies and music, I'm not into ranking people, but their team has to be in the conversation with the good UCONN teams I've seen.

Q. Talk about having the same record in the SEC with the SEC being deeper and tougher this year. Talk about how impactful that is for your tournament chances.

COACH NEIGHBORS: I hope a lot. You gotta look around what goes on the rest of the league. Y'all know I follow it really, really closely and have historically. I know it's going to be tight and I think it's going to come down to little things, and I hope we have crossed -- given enough evidence, given enough fact and film, that we will be in the conversation.

Whatever happens, happens. I was really proud of our group, the way they responded to it. We've done what we could do now, and regardless of which way it goes, in it's the NCAA tournament or the NIT Tournament, let's use it as an opportunity to grow and learn.

I do know this when it's all said and done: we're going to look back at games that will be valuable lessons learned for us and things we did last summer. Coming out of COVID all these kids were in different spots, and I will tell you it was the least demanding I've ever been during the summer because of that, and as a result, we probably got a little bit of a late start.

I do think we're peaking at the right time as a result of that, but at the end of that we made some decisions they'll look back at and never regret because I know where they were at mentally. But physically there are going to be some games we regret. There is no question. Some 1-point losses, some 1-possession losses, some things we could have done differently, but I won't regret how we finished and how we have gone about doing it - and staying concerned about their mental wellness as well their physical wellness.

Q. What can you speak to about coaching a team that's "on the NCAA tournament?" What does it do to a potential coaching style? For the ladies on the team, how do you keep them from not thinking about it?

COACH NEIGHBORS: I think you explain it to them. I think if you try to hide it from them is when the problem happens, when there is not information and they don't know. There was a period of time our kids were thinking we had been eliminated -- they were thinking we were next to last.

I have these magnets up in my office and one of the

players came up and saw it and they were like, what is that? I showed that to them and they were like, I think the whole team needs to see this.

In our league it can do that to you. It's hard, but you know that when you sign up for it. You try to protect your kids as much as you can from not having too much information, but giving the right amount, and explain to them what it is and what's important so that there is not a regret at the end of it. I think that's why they're saying that.

If the regret is there, it's something we have done. It won't be the committee or something that some other team did, it will be something on us. That's what I'm proud of them for. That's the growth they made.

But it's not easy in this league. You look at how hard it is to go multiple years in a row, and that's why you've got to respect what Dawn has done. Tennessee hasn't missed one. They have been in every NCAA tournament ever, right?

That type of consistency is really, really hard to do, but there is a number of our teams that have -- we started at the bottom, we got here, were picked last, and now to be the talking about on the bubble, we did that in 2019 too, when we were in that Debatable 8 thing.

I would rather be in the talk than out of the talk, you know what I'm sayin'? There are a lot of teams -- if you're the 38th best at-large team, I would rather be the 38th than the 68th best. I'm proud of where we are and that our bottom now doesn't mean we are out of the conversation like it's been traditionally.

It's hard but it's worth it.

Q. Talk about the schematics of facing a team like South Carolina that has a completely different style of play than y'all, and also how South Carolina request obliterate everything at the rim and drop defense?

COACH NEIGHBORS: There are no schematics. I can draw up some of the best plays that have worked historically for the best teams I've coached. They're not going to work when you try to throw it inside against those kids. It's a challenge to find a good shot. It really stresses you out, and you feel bad -- I feel bad as a coach when our kids get their shot blocked or have to take a tough shot or they wind it down.

But at the same time when you have talented players that play hard and are well coached that's what you run into, and that's what South Carolina has built. It's a good barometer for the rest of us to look at, but as far as

scouting reports go, it's the easiest one to do, because it's all based on personnel.

They're not going to beat you with tricks. They're going to beat you with being better position-by-position, across the board.

Q. I was hoping you could speak to Saylor. Not only what she put on tonight but what she's put on this whole season and her growth, and also just how young she is.

COACH NEIGHBORS: Yeah, we take it for granted, I think, because we got her last Christmas, and she is way mature. She has been in college for a while because she left her high school a year early. You don't think of her as a typical freshman because of her maturity, but you know her family, you know she was brought up that way.

The impact is hard to measure with stats. You have to be around us, you have to be at practice, you have to be on the plane, you have to be on the bus. As far as impact freshman she gets up there at the top of my list with Plumb and Aari McDonald and going back to players, Sam last year being the SEC Freshman of the Year.

She is in that conversation of all-time freshman-ready kids. I think you used her as a comparison to Mak. In her last couple of years she will be that voice. Mak started every game since she has been here, she had it as a freshman. Saylor has got a lot of those traits and qualities. More importantly she wants to be a leader. She is okay being held to a standard -- when you are a leader your standards are scrutinized pretty close and she is going to be okay with that. She has made a huge impact for us.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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