

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Tennessee Lady Volunteers

Coach Kellie Harper

Jordan Horston

Rickea Jackson

Postgame Press Conference



South Carolina 74, Tennessee 58

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the press conference for the Tennessee Lady Volunteers. Joined by head Coach Kellie Harper and student athletes Jordan Horston and Rickea Jackson.

Coach?

COACH HARPER: Yeah, congratulations to South Carolina. Extremely impressive to go blemish-free through the regular season and the tournament, and that's really tough to do. They have had great consistency and obviously they're talented, so congrats to them, first and foremost.

Proud of our team and the fight they had. You've got to play your best basketball game of the year I think to knock that team off. While we did some good things, it may not have been our best game, but players kept fighting and really digging and trying to give ourselves a chance.

Q. Jordan, how would you describe the fight that this team has?

JORDAN HORSTON: Tenacious. That's our word. You know, we never quit. We gonna have a long fight. I believe in this team, no matter what. We keep that effort, we keep that toughness, and work on the little things we need to fix, we gonna have a long ride, so I'm not worried.

Q. Rickea, what do you think this tournament run that you guys had does for you guys heading into the NCAAs?

RICKEA JACKSON: It just builds our confidence, you know, the things that -- we know the things that we have to work on and continue to get better at, but also like for us to even make it this far says a lot about our toughness and our mental toughness.

This tournament is tough. Our bodies hurt, our mentals are tired, but we had a hard fight and I feel like we were relentless.

Q. There were spurts in the game where you guys were within single digits of them but struggled to keep that pace. What was that difference in the stretch where they were able to go on and make those 10, 15, 17-point leads?

JORDAN HORSTON: That's a good question. I probably can't tell you right now because I would have to rewatch the game. Based on what I think happened is we would make a mistake and they would capitalize off of it.

Can't do that against the number one team. They're a great team. They would capitalize on every mistake that we make. So we'll sit down and watch film and I could tell you a better answer, but I feel like we got what it takes to beat them. We got what it takes to beat anybody.

Q. How do you think it helps your team grow playing South Carolina twice this year?

RICKEA JACKSON: Playing the number one team in the country, you know, coming within the point margin we did, I feel like -- like I said before, it builds our confidence knowing we can compete with them.

They got length, they got size, and they're a really great team. They're disciplined and they capitalized, like Jordy said, off our mistakes. We just have to learn to continue to do that and capitalize more.

Q. To get to this stage, what does it say about what you were able to do this season and how tough it was in the beginning, but to find so much success here late?



JORDAN HORSTON: We always knew we had it in us. Everybody else didn't know that, but we knew, and we still know. This fight ain't over.

Like I said, I'm not holding my head on this loss. That's the number one team in the country and we was hanging with them. Once we clean up what we need to clean up, we can beat them, like I said, but we happy being the underdogs. It's okay.

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

Q. Kellie, do you think after last night's emotional win and comeback that in the second half you guys ran out of gas?

COACH HARPER: Yeah, we were definitely low in the tank. I thought we were probably low in the tank in part of the first half as well.

One thing we kept doing was kept asking our team just to keep fighting, keep digging in. You could see it a little bit. Some of their shots, some of their getting up and down the floor was a little slower. I think the mental and emotional fatigue is as heavy as the physical.

Q. Coach, the play that the team has had throughout the SEC Tournament, what does it tell you about their play for the NCAA tournament?

COACH HARPER: I think we have had some really good basketball and we've shown a lot of grit. I think we have come a long way. I'm excited for the journey to continue, to see what this team can do. I think they really believe in each other and they believe in this basketball team.

Q. You mentioned being a little low in the tank. I noticed maybe more so in the second half that there were quite a few scoring droughts that y'all had that prevented you from making a meaningful comeback. How do you assess those spurts?

COACH HARPER: Yeah, that's obviously tough. We shoot the ball less than 20% there in that third quarter. First off, they're not going to let you have easy shots. They're just not going to give you easy looks, so you're going to have to work and it's going to be tough already, and probably just a little bit short.

Didn't have the pop and didn't have the bounce. It's not an excuse. I don't mean that, because obviously they're playing their third game in three days as well. But I know for us, I do think their defense along with that caused that

drought.

Q. Kellie, what's the next week or so look like for you guys? Gonna give them some time off?

COACH HARPER: They definitely earned some time off. Their bodies need it. They need to recuperate it. We are best when we are fresh legged, as I'm sure most people are, but there is a big difference with us when we've got a little bit more bounce.

Then we will get back out there on the court and try to work on some things, maybe some wrinkles, clean up some things, shore up some things, and give this team a lot of confidence going into the tournament.

Q. What are you most proud of from this season and specifically in the tournament when you look back at this team?

COACH HARPER: I think how we've evolved as a team has been what we wanted to see. We've always -- from the beginning of the season we had the talent, but I just wanted to see a little bit more grit and a little bit more toughness, and I think we've developed that.

I think we're a little bit more physical than we were early on. I think our understanding -- we said this quite a bit -- our understanding of how we need to play has been good for our team's success.

Q. Can you talk about going into that fourth quarter, what you told your team, what the mindset was going in to finish it out?

COACH HARPER: Yeah, obviously, you know, I think they were pretty gassed going into it. We talked about trying to chip away at the lead. Let's find a score and a stop, to hang in there.

I thought they were battling, battling on the boards, and I told them to keep hanging in there on the boards, keep battling. We gave up obviously too many there in the second half, but the try was there, the effort was there.

I think for us just trying to recover from that poor shooting percentage was really tough.

Q. You talked in your opening statement about how difficult it is to go undefeated up to this point. You experienced that. If you recall, how did your undefeated season unfold? Did it get easier as things went on? Did you feel additional pressure as we got to this point of the season?

COACH HARPER: You know, I think there -- looking back there were some games that really defined our team when we went undefeated, and it was pushing through those tough games, getting the tough win. Those were the ones that set you up for the next one. Those were the tests.

It's not always the last one, you know. It's throughout the season, because it is hard to go undefeated. That's an understatement. It's hard to go undefeated in your league. No one knows you better than your league. They know your strength and your weaknesses better than anyone.

So, again, what they've been able to do, it's pretty special. It really is. Obviously we're disappointed. We want to be the ones out there under the confetti, but congrats to them because it's been impressive.

Q. As you guys have this time to rest and recover before the tournament starts, is there any big focus that you want to hone in on? Specifically for the tournament, the focus and the next week and a half?

COACH HARPER: We will get together as a staff and determine what areas we need to concentrate on, focus on. Obviously at this point in the season you are typically trying to work on a little bit of everything. Also, you know, find some new things to keep it fun, make sure they're enjoying this time as well.

This should be a fun time right here.

Q. Could you speak to the fouls in the second half? I guess how you're feeling with your team, and I know some things didn't go y'all's way with the calls.

COACH HARPER: We kept battling. I thought a lot of our fouls came on the boards. We were trying to get in there and we were outsized, but we were trying to be physical and trying to get the right position.

I think that's where some of ours came from. We weren't able to get to the free throw line like we have been able to do the last couple of games. I think that was a little bit frustrating on our part.

Q. Obviously a lot of lessons learned this season, especially against LSU, all that poise leading to that. Any new wrinkles that you discovered about this team and this game that you hope to use in the NCAA tournament or leading up to it?

COACH HARPER: I think every game we're trying to find something that can give us even a slight advantage. We will go back and figure out what that is. Maybe some things we thought would be an advantage was actually not.

So we will look at some things. We're not going to overhaul who we are. We know who we are. We've got to make sure that we play to our strengths, whatever that is. If it's a new wrinkle, if it's continuing to do what we've done, we've got to continue to play to our strengths.

Q. Earlier in the season you said to me I think at one point, we don't know what our identity is. Now you just said, now we know who we are. Can you describe who are y'all?

COACH HARPER: I think we have been an aggressive team. We've been, obviously, a team that has found some toughness, found some grit. You know, we were hanging in there for a long time.

I was hoping we might out-rebound them today, but I think we've rebounded the ball at a better clip late than we did earlier this season.

I told our team, you know, the thing that I feel like I can say, I think we've got some toughness in us, and I'm proud to be able to say that. We learned that.

Q. If you could, just recap your time here in Greenville and what you were able to do in the tournament.

COACH HARPER: It's been a lot of fun. Obviously it's tournament time. There is something you gotta love about how you just feel drained from day-to-day. It's just part of it. You love that. You love to compete. Coaches stay up late trying to get a scouting report together. You're trying to make sure the team is recovered and rested. It's just part of tournament time. That's what our sport is. Basketball is a tournament sport.

Boy, you better love this time of year. We do. I do. I love the emotions, I love the competitiveness, and I love the opportunity that we gave ourselves today.

Q. Is there anything new that you learned about your team throughout this week? I know you have mentioned their grit, their effort; anything new?

COACH HARPER: I feel like we've seen it coming. I was really pleased in how we were able to get a couple of wins and then come out and compete in the championship game.

This group hasn't been on the floor on Sundays, and that was a loud crowd, a big environment. It was a big moment. I didn't think the moment was too big for our team. I think that was important.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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