

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Vanderbilt Commodores

Shea Ralph

Women's Media Day Press Conference

SHEA RALPH: Well, good morning, everyone. I'm really excited to be here to represent Vanderbilt University. Really looking forward to my second year as head coach at Vanderbilt. Excited for what this brings for me, for our team and for our program. I'm a "less is more" kind of person. So I can sit here and talk to you guys all day, but I'm sure questions would be better for both of us. Please feel free to ask when you're ready.

Q. What did you learn in your first year of being in this league?

SHEA RALPH: I think I learned a lot about myself. I will say that being in the best league in the country arguably -- if you're paying attention in college women's basketball, you know the SEC is the best league, and you've got to go through the SEC to win a National Championship.

I learned a lot about myself in terms of what I needed to do to meet my players where they were, and where I came from, the goal was National Championship or bust every year. We had the kind of program that had sustainable excellence.

Now where I am we have a tradition of excellence but we're trying to get it back to that level. Vanderbilt has been to SEC championship games. They've won them. They've been to Final Four, almost 30 NCAA tournaments, Sweet 16s, Elite Eights. So this program has a tradition of excellence. But we've got to get it back there and beyond.

One thing we haven't done is won a National Championship. So I learned a lot about making sure that we lay the foundation that's necessary to be able to sustain that level of excellence once we get it there, and you can't skip any steps.

For me, maybe one of my achilles heel traits kind of things is impatience. I want it to happen now. So last year was



humbling, and it taught me patience and the value of the process.

We talk a lot about that. You hear a lot about that. But I really learned the value of that because I think from the beginning of the year to the end of the year we got a lot better, and our players saw the improvement that we can make just by focusing on the things we can control: playing hard, playing together, playing smart, having fun.

Just by doing those things, we made huge strides last year, and that was promising.

Q. Can you speak to making this team your own? What in the last year have you done to not just inherit a team or a roster but really construct something that's of your own making?

SHEA RALPH: Yes, for sure. When I came here, one of the things that was really important to me was investing in our people, bringing great people in to surround my student-athletes with, to be part of this program, and then also recruiting student-athletes that had the values in terms of what I know are things that I can't coach. So that exists both on your staff and on your team.

There are things people have that they bring to the table, tangible qualities. I have great rebounders, kids that can score points. On my staff I have people that are really good at scheduling, communication.

But those things to me are things we can learn, that we can get better at.

The values part, the intangible qualities that I think are really important when you're talking about building something special or revitalizing something special is something I can't coach.

When I thought about what do I want this to be, how do I want to make it my own, it was by investing and bringing in the right people, because if you do that, then everything else you can learn. Everything else you can get better at.

If you don't have that, there isn't very far that you can go, because those are things that I know I can't give people. So it started there.



Q. Obviously at Vanderbilt you can say, hey, come to a great school; but when you're being recruited, UConn is saying come play for a good program. Recruiting is obviously more than that in the NIL era. How do you deal with that? How have you adjusted to that as a coach like every coach is having to adjust?

SHEA RALPH: Right. I mean, I think every one of us is still in the process of it. There are still things that we don't know. There's still a gray area. There's still some decisions that need to be made, whether it's in our conference or across the country.

But I love the position I'm in at Vanderbilt. I think we are completely unique in that we offer a lifelong NIL. So the Vanderbilt degree is a really special thing that turns heads. That gets your resume to the top of the pile.

When you talk about that degree that we offer -- and we're the best academic school in the SEC, but we're one of the best across the country, as well.

I have nothing to do with that. That is our university. That's the academic reputation of Vanderbilt.

Now, what I can do is bring our basketball program up to that level, as well. So now we have things to offer that aren't just for the next four years. They're for the next 40, both in the classroom and as it relates to your degree and how that will impact the rest of your life, and on the basketball court, and how that will impact however long you want to play, your basketball career.

When we think about NIL, obviously we're dealing with it right now in the short-term, but the long-term to me is where Vanderbilt adds incredible value, and that's something that I can offer that no one else in our conference can.

Q. You guys reached new heights last year, getting your first SEC tournament win in about six years and then making a postseason run. How are you using those new heights that you reached last year as kind of a platform or foundation for what you can do this season?

SHEA RALPH: So I really don't focus on the past as much. One of the things that you guys will see, over the last couple of months, our team is going to look a lot different this year. So last year shows us what we're capable of if we put our minds to something together, if we work hard together, if we focus on the process and not the outcome.

This year is going to be completely different. But we have

laid that foundation of trust and belief in the minds of our players and our staff and the message that we are communicating.

I'm not worried about where we're going. I'm just worried about making sure we stay focused on that process and knowing that, if we do that, we'll continue to take steps forward, and then the outcome will take care of itself.

It's a constant building. It's constant laying that foundation. Now comes the next level and the next level, and we can't and I can't skip any steps. Every day we focus on being a little bit better than we were the day before, all the things we can control, the strategy we're going to use to make sure we can put ourselves in the best position possible for success.

Q. Last season Jordyn Cambridge led the nation in steals. What has she done over the summer to elevate her skills, and what makes her so good defensively?

SHEA RALPH: Well, Jordyn Cambridge isn't going to be playing this year. She had an achilles rupture. About a month ago she put out a statement. She is going to come back for her final year, but she won't be on the court this year. Just so you know, I'm not sure if you knew that or not, but I will speak also to her defensive prowess because she's going to be that for us when she does come back.

It's not necessarily a technique. It is a skill that she's developed, but defense is effort and heart and a desire to want to win, to want to be the most competitive person on the floor, and Jordyn has that. That's what I'm talking about in terms of like having the right people.

That's not something I can give you. You either want to be great, you want to be the most competitive, the most tenacious person on the floor to do whatever it takes to win, or you don't. I can't coach you to have that.

She has that, and with that, we're able to put her in a position of success on the floor. That's why we pressed as much as we did last year, because Jordyn wanted that, she valued it, and she was on the Naismith watch list for Defensive Player of the Year.

We expect her to come back ready to do that again when she's healed up.

Q. You mentioned just a second ago that this team will look different this year. Can you go into a few more specifics of how this team will look different, both on the personnel level but also just strategy and what's on the court?

SHEA RALPH: Yes. So we have -- we only have one starter from last year that will currently be playing this year. We've added two grad transfers and three freshmen that will be expected to play a lot. Right now we have nine healthy players. We had a roster of 12.

But that is what it is. That's part of sports. All nine of these players can be contributors and will be expected to be contributors.

The way that I think our team will look different, last year we had a very specific idea of where we could score and how we were going to score. I think that expanded as we moved on into the year, but we created our identity around our defense.

So offensively I think we're going to have to be more creative. We're going to have more options for people that can score. We're going to be a little bit smaller. But that is an opportunity for us to do some things differently.

Defensively, again, is where I think we'll have our identity, and that's not going to look a whole lot different. I think it's something that our players have really bought into and love and will be a cornerstone of our program for the foreseeable future.

Q. Sacha Washington has stepped up as a big-time contributor at the end of the season, very strong rebounder. How much has she improved over the off-season, and what do you expect from her in this upcoming year?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I think she's improved a lot, but I think time will tell. We spend most of our summer workouts on individual player development. She has spent numerous hours continuing to improve, expand her game, expand her range.

But one of the things that I think is evident about Sacha, she came into my office a couple months ago, and I asked her what she wants to be, what does she want her basketball career to be. And she told me she wants to be a pro. She didn't say that last year. She has a different mentality this year, and she has a different expectation. She is that lone returning starter.

There is going to be a lot on her shoulders, and I think she's prepared for it. Time will tell, and there's adversity that comes along with that. There's growth that's going to come along with that for her. But every day she's practicing like she wants to be great, so I'm excited to see what that turns out to look like for her.

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