

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Thursday, October 19, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Vanderbilt Commodores

Shea Ralph

Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are ready for Vanderbilt. We're going to go straight to questions.

Q. To have Jordyn Cambridge back, talk about that. Having her out for a season. What is she bringing back to this team?

SHEA RALPH: Yes, good morning, everyone. I just want to say, first of all, I know no opening statement because I didn't want to do that. I wanted to also thank you guys for being here today.

Really excited to be representing Vanderbilt. To have the team that we have, the support of the administration, my coaching staff. I love this event. I love competing in the SEC with all the other coaches and incredible teams.

To be able to have Jordyn Cambridge back this year is elevating us even more. She is the heart and soul of our team. This is her sixth year playing college basketball and her last year of basketball. So she's putting everything out on the table.

Barring myself, having had five ACLs when I was a competitor in college and in the pros, Jordyn might be the only other person I know that's overcome as much adversity as a college athlete.

To me, her perseverance and her resiliency is indicative of what I want our program to represent. She has fought her way back to the court. She loves to compete. She loves going out and challenging herself every single day and seeing how much better she can get.

That is exactly what I want our program to embody. While we look at over the past couple of years where we've been and where we're going, the things we've had to overcome, I know that our goals are big. I want our program to be competing for championships. I have a vision for our

program, we talk a lot about the tradition of excellence at Vanderbilt women's basketball has had in the past. It's a storied program.

We are here to revitalize it. To be in that conversation of programs that are competing for championships every year, that's a big goal. My players have bought into that. We want to go back to the NCAA tournament this year. That's a big goal.

But I know that if we can have the attitude that Jordyn brings every single day, which is "I love doing this, I love going to school, I love competing at this level, I love coming out on the court with the people that I care about and seeing how much better I can get every day," if we can do that every single day, I'm excited to see what our program will produce this year.

Q. Retaining a player like Sacha Washington, in a transfer era like this, not a guarantee, what were the conversations you had with her, and why do you think she came back?

SHEA RALPH: That's a huge question I think for everybody that does what I do in our conference.

Number one, my vision for our program is to be the premier holistic developmental program in the country. One of the things that I really challenge my staff to do is to invest in our student-athletes as young women and to make sure that they know, while we want to be very competitive on the basketball court, and I want them to reach their highest potential as basketball players, I also want them to reach their highest potential as young women.

I want them to be just as competitive in the classroom. I want them to be elite in the community and on the campus.

When you operate like that on a daily basis and you invest in your student-athletes, obviously we have conversations about NIL, and I'm grateful to our administration for investing in -- our athletic department investing in us as coaches to help us educate our players in that way, but I also know the things we bring Sacha are more than just what she gets on the basketball court.



The conversation that you ask that was had was never really needed to be had with her. She's just as invested in us as we are in her. Together I think we know we're going to go really far. We can't wait to see how far that is.

For Sacha, the sky is the limit. She's a junior this year. That kid has played more minutes for me than any other player on our roster. I can't wait for everyone else to see how much better she's gotten, how much value the last year brought to her even though it was a struggle. We all know that the most growth you have is in moments of struggle. Sacha grew a ton last year. I'm excited to see what this year holds for her.

I know that as she continues to get better, we'll continue to be a partner with her in offering her the opportunities that she deserves.

Q. Talk about what Coach Auriemma has meant to you. You played for him, what you take as far as his philosophy now and use it in your purpose to build a good program at Vanderbilt.

SHEA RALPH: Yes, thank you for that question.

I've spent half my life at the University of Connecticut. I played there for five years. I coached there for almost 15. To pick one lesson that I learned, it's a tough one.

I think the thing that I appreciated most about my time at Connecticut was how it built resiliency in me as a person, as a young woman, as a basketball player, as a leader, as a coach and a mentor.

So overcoming the adversity that I overcame, number one, but also being given the opportunity to do that by Coach Auriemma and his staff, to be continuously pushed to reach my fullest potential. The experiences that I had there in doing that, the highs and the lows made me want to become a basketball coach, to do that for other players, other young women. That experience gave me this passion, gave me this chance and this desire to be that for the players that come through my program.

I often say I think it would have been -- I had a great career. I could have stayed at Connecticut for the rest of my life. I love that program. I'm fully invested in it. But it would have been a shame for me not to everything that I learned to help countless other young women.

When I came across Dr. Candice Storey Lee and learned about how much our visions and values aligned for what we wanted to do at Vanderbilt in our respective roles, this opportunity was a no-brainer. I love it every day. I learned

so much at Connecticut, but I continue to learn so much at Vanderbilt. We have so much support in our administration from Candice. We have support on the university side from the chancellor.

We have our initiative, Vandy United, which is elevating all of our facilities. Next year at this time we will be in a brand-new practice facility that will be the biggest one in the country. That tells you where athletics stands at Vanderbilt; that they're giving us the opportunity, the resources and the investment to go out and recruit the best student-athletes globally.

Who wouldn't want to be part of that? The lessons that I learned at Connecticut made me who I am, but I continue to grow into what I want to be at Vanderbilt.

Q. Last year you said you're preparing your kids for both the WNBA but your own program. That's not a universally agreed-upon thing. Why do you have that belief? Do you think that should be universal amongst coaches?

SHEA RALPH: Can you give me a little more detail on what was controversial about that.

Q. There were players who made statements that they felt like their coaching -- what they had in college was not preparing them for the league.

SHEA RALPH: That's true. I wasn't quite sure which part you were talking about. Yes, I do remember that.

I think you can do both. I'm not saying it's easy. I think it requires buy-in from both parts.

I was talking to a high school coach that came to practice last week, sharing with them how important grassroots basketball is to the success, early success especially, of student-athletes at the college level, specifically at this level. We play in the best conference in college women's basketball. I mean, it is a battle. It's Armageddon every night.

You're already competing against the best in the country, people that are hoping to play in the WNBA already here at this level.

I think you can do both, but it requires your student-athletes to buy in, to progress, to invest every single day, to believe and trust in what you're doing.

I also think it's a process. I think often we as people get caught up in instant gratification. How can I have what I want right now? We want to win right now. I hear a lot

about winning culture. No one hates to lose more than me. But I think for me, if I had to define a culture for our program, I would say we're a learning culture.

I want them to learn every single day. I want them to fail in a way that teaches them the lessons they need to know so they can incrementally progress, so that as they grow as basketball players and people, it won't have to be a certain system that they play in. They will have the resiliency to play in any system for any coach because they are great basketball players.

That takes time, patience on my part, investment. And it's not that easy to do, as you spoke about earlier, with now the landscape of college athletics changing. Having that amount of time with players isn't always gifted, expected, earned. You just never know.

That's part of the reason why my vision exists for our program in being developmental. There are steps to it. You're not going to become a WNBA player in a year. There are steps to it. You're not going to become a great college basketball player in a year. You may not get off the bench. There were several players I worked with in my previous school that that happened to their freshman year, and then they were lottery picks.

I've seen it happen. I know it can be done. At the end of the day, it's me having the patience and the investment in my players and also finding that in my players and having the right players be part of our program.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck.

SHEA RALPH: Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody. A pleasure to see you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports