

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Wednesday, October 16, 2024

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Women's Media Day Press Conference



Jordyn is not the player that needs to shoot the ball 20 times. She doesn't need the spotlight on her, all the attention. She wants to do whatever it takes for our team to win.

In order to win games at a high level, at a high clip, to be a championship team, you have got to have players like that on your team. She's one of them. Really, really happy she's here.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome Shea Ralph of Vanderbilt University to the stage.

We'll go straight to questions.

Q. Earlier this week you had your contract extended. What does that mean that Vanderbilt believes in what you're doing?

SHEA RALPH: It's hard to put what that means into words for me. When we came here, my husband and I, to take over the program at Vanderbilt, we had extensive conversations with both Drs. Candice Storey Lee and Chancellor Diermeier about our vision for the program and bringing it back to national prominence.

And being in the conversation for championships every year is very important to us. This wasn't a steppingstone for me. This is somewhere I want to be for a long time.

To see some of that vision come into reality now as we had a great season last year, and to hear Candice and Chancellor Diermeier want to extend my contract, believe in my vision, see the progress, is very, very, very meaningful and important to us. It helps me with recruiting. It helps my players, my staff. Just really excited to be here at Vanderbilt for as long as I can be. I love it.

Q. I spoke to Jordyn. What are some of the attributes she will bring to the team to help you win ball games?

SHEA RALPH: Jordyn Oliver has one of the highest IQs I've been around in a long time. She understands the game of basketball. She's an incredible play-maker.

When you're building a team, trying to create a championship culture that you need is that, but it's also understanding the value of sacrifice.

Q. You had Jordyn Cambridge last year. She graduated from the program. You brought in Leilani. How is she going to help fill that void?

SHEA RALPH: When you lose a player like Jordyn Cambridge, it's hard to fill those shoes, right? There's not going to be anyone that replicates what she was able to do for our team.

But I do think the additions we made this year are going to be powerful in their own right.

Bringing in Leilani and Jane Nwaba, both incredibly athletic, strong guards, versatile, with experience at a high level. Jane coming from Pepperdine. Leilani was a great player at Penn State.

We add two freshmen that are going to turn some heads. Mikayla Blakes has been one of our best players in practice every single day, has brought a competitive fire and a will to win and a fearlessness that I haven't seen in a freshman in a long time.

Trinity Wilson, who most of you probably don't know, but I played with her mom in college. 6'4", big teddy bear, very skilled, high IQ. I tell the players all the time you have to cut with your hands in front of your face, she's going to whip it, when you're open before you know you're open.

There's a lot of great diversity to our new group. Losing Jordyn Cambridge is tough. But bringing the new four in, having them seamlessly mold with our team is going to be great for us as we move forward this year.

Q. How much farther along are you starting this



season, getting ready for the season, than you've been at any point in the program?

SHEA RALPH: I feel like that's a trick question (smiling). You think you're further along some days; then there are days where I'm like, We are so not there yet.

Part of that is we haven't played a game yet, played a scrimmage. Our first scrimmage is this weekend. I think we'll know a lot more after that.

I will say the one adjustment that I made as a coach this year, bringing in our new players, understanding the trajectory of our program, the success we had last year, we focused a ton on laying the foundation of our culture. I feel like our culture is in a pretty good place. And we were able to start practice a little sooner this year. We've been together for longer. We're playing more five-on-five than we have. I love a good drill.

The additions that we've made, the success that we've had, the movement of our program in a positive direction has allowed me to do some things sooner.

I also think the experience of being a head coach has kind of pushed me into doing some things sooner so that we're not tripping over some of the mistakes we've had in the past early on in the season.

Talk to me again next week after our scrimmage. I'm hopeful. I may have a different answer.

I really love coaching this team, too. They're a really good group, they're competitive, they want to win. They came here to win. We're in year four. We came off a really successful season, our most successful season in a decade.

The energy is really good right now. As you guys say, they understand the assignment. They understand the assignment.

The other thing that's awesome right now on our campus, it's just a great time to be a Commodore. You're watching our football team, women's soccer team do historic things. Being on campus when we beat Alabama, that hasn't ever happened.

We're a very tight-knit campus, coaches and athletes. We all have the same vision for our programs, a holistic development in our student-athletes where we're pouring into them as athletes, students, members of the community, young human beings. It's awesome to be part of that right now.

The women's basketball program, we get to move into a brand-new practice facility in about a month and a half, which will be the biggest one in the country. So you look at our vision, where we want to go, what we did last year, but you also have the support that I have in our A.D., our chancellor.

Right now you know the landscape is changing rapidly, and we're still doing all of these things to make sure at Vanderbilt we're creating the best student-athlete experience in the country. That is really special. My staff feels it. Our players feel it. We're ready to do special things this year.

Q. What does the NIL landscape at Vanderbilt for women's basketball look like?

SHEA RALPH: The NIL landscape, it changes every day. What it's been probably depends on each university and each coach that you ask. It's going to be different.

I think if anybody tells you they know what it's going to be, they're not telling you the truth, not yet, anyway, until the settlement clears and we have a little bit of an idea of what the guardrails look like.

I will say at Vanderbilt I feel very supported by our athletic department, by my athletic director. I think we can be competitive with anyone.

I'm really excited to be here and not have to worry about that.

Q. You just talked about last season was the season where you got a chance to really implement your culture. Nine returners starting back. How beneficial is that in terms of continuing to push your culture into this program?

SHEA RALPH: Could you repeat the first part of the question. You said last year the trajectory. Are you talking about the culture or winning?

Q. The culture. How do you see having nine returners coming back, how do you see that advancing the culture even more?

SHEA RALPH: Obviously it's huge to have retention. Right now one of the things that I'm really proud of for our program, for my staff, and I'm happy for our kids, is that we're transformational. I don't know that I'm capable of being a transactional coach, even though that's part of what we're dealing with right now, it's reality in the college athletic world that we live in.

We do try to pour into our student-athletes. I think it's much like parents. You have to be super consistent every day and hope they start to pick up some really good habits. For us, this is years in the making.

One of the things I thought was really cool for our team last year was to experience some success, to see some of the hard work, some of the things that we preach every single day in terms of their habits and their belief, their values, the way they show up, actually pay off in results.

There isn't anything I can do to make that happen. It takes time, effort, belief. Sometimes you're not going to get the results that you want, but it can't change who you are. We keep harping on that.

That has been a foundational part of our program and who we are. I think the fact that we did have some success last year has helped our players believe even more. If you remember, when we got to Vanderbilt, we didn't have players here that had won before. They didn't know what a winning culture or a winning team or what it looked like to be a winner felt like or looked like. They didn't have that behavior modeled.

We had to start from scratch and build that inside of them. It takes time. I constantly preach to them about that. I thought last year was a huge steppingstone for us in that way so that they understand that great things, it's not like the world we live in, not like Amazon, I want something, it's at your doorstep 10 a.m. the next day. That's not how this works. You have to put constant work into being a great athlete, being great at whatever it is that you choose for your profession. When they move on to being a great family member, a great partner, all those things take time and effort.

I do think that carryover will help our younger guys hopefully learn a little bit more. But there is a belief that sits in them now because they've had results.

Q. You mentioned the football win over Alabama. That synergy across campus is real.

SHEA RALPH: It is. Anchor down, y'all. It is real.

Q. Is the buzz still there from that game? Still an excitement? Describe that a little more.

SHEA RALPH: There is this feeling on campus that change is happening, right? I think sometimes when you equate change with college athletics, we like to talk about it in a negative way.

But I think for what's going on at Vanderbilt is it's positive.

Change doesn't have to be negative. We are doing all these things, being competitive at a very high level, which, let's be honest, most people didn't think would happen, certainly not this year.

When you look at our football team, who most of us, because it's such a tight-knit campus, have relationships with the players and coaches, and they have the same committed vision and process that all of us have. To see them have those results, to see it sustain itself over the course of the next week, where they're doing things that people said they couldn't.

No one in that locker room didn't believe that they were going to do it. No one on that staff, no one in our community. We saw the work they were putting in. That transfers. That belief, that passion, that confidence transfers into our student-athletes, into our staff. It is truly really cool to witness because it's all that anyone's talking about.

I know that our players see it. They're experiencing it. They want that feeling in our locker room. That's not something I can fabricate as a coach. Everybody else also knows that in the SEC it's great to have a successful football team. In the country, in college athletics, you want to have a successful football team. Our football team understands that. Our community understands that. We are behind them 100%.

I'm telling you, it's historic, never happened before. Anytime you can be part of something historic, it's awesome.

Q. Several of the coaches today have been asked about their thoughts on the impact of Texas and Oklahoma coming into the league.

SHEA RALPH: I should say I love competing at a high level. It's one of the reasons that I was so drawn to Vanderbilt. It's one of the reasons I love being in the SEC Conference. It's one of the reasons I love recruiting players that want to be great, having players on my team that want to be great.

If you want to be great, you have to go up against the best. You got to put your hat in the ring. Now, as we add these traditionally excellent programs to our conference, we're going to have the ability to do that day in and day out. I think it can only help you get better.

It's going to be tough, but that's what we all signed up for. I'm excited because I think they're two great programs. I respect them both a lot. It will be fun to compete against them.



THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

SHEA RALPH: Thank you, guys. It's a pleasure to be here.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

