

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Tuesday, October 14, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome from Vanderbilt coach Shea Ralph.

SHEA RALPH: Good morning, everyone. I am so thrilled to be here. My fifth year here with you all. Looking forward to our fifth season as a team as we revitalize our program at Vanderbilt.

When we think about Vanderbilt athletics, the landscape is changing for all of us in college athletics, but we want to be the new blueprint for what it looks like to balance championship performance and academic excellence.

One of my goals since I took this job was to make sure we can compete for championships while building a championship culture and also be the premier Player Development Program in the country.

As I look at the athletes that I have here today, the things they said they wanted to do when they came to Vanderbilt, and Mikayla Blakes is a perfect example, last year was one of the best seasons that a freshman at Vanderbilt has had in a very long time, if ever.

I want her to learn how to win with integrity. Which she does. I want her to lead with purpose and to make sure that we make community impacts that last for a lifetime. So a lot of the things that we talk about in our program is how do we leave a legacy, we win championships and leave it better than we found it. I think we're well on the way to doing that with our women's basketball program.

I look forward to some questions now, if you guys have 'em.

Q. It's pretty remarkable looking at y'all's back-to-back years after your first two years. What did those first two years' teams that didn't have the win/loss that you wanted do to set up the next two years?

SHEA RALPH: Great question. We had players on that team, coaches, administrators, there were people that are here on my staff that have been with me since we got here, that were really committed to building something that was bigger than themselves, being part of something that was bigger than themselves.

They knew it might take a long time, that we might not achieve it right away. But they bought in to the standards and values that I wanted the program to be about. They really did that. They laid the foundation for our program to be able to take the steps we have taken the last few years.

I can never thank them enough. They are part of this. They will always be part of it. They understood the assignment, as the young kids say now, when they got here and did everything they could to make sure we kept moving in the right direction.

Q. You've talked about Aubrey Galvan a good bit. Even though she's been on campus for a short amount of time, where have you seen her grow the most?

SHEA RALPH: Aubrey Galvan is one of those players that you love as a coach. I love her because she's fearless. She's an undersized point guard from the outskirts of Chicago, maybe a little bit under-recruited. She wasn't on the main circuit.

I love coaching her because she's fearless, but it also drives me crazy at times. But I know that players like her don't come around a lot.

What I've seen from her since she's been here with us is an ability to step right in and make an immediate impact. For a point guard, I need a high-IQ point guard, I want a high-IQ point guard that understands the game and that understands where the ball needs to go and that can play on both ends of the floor. Aubrey can do all of that. She has a little bit of a chip on her shoulder, which I appreciate, because I've always had that.

She also gives us the chance to put Mikayla Blakes off the ball a little bit more. Anytime you want to have a



championship team, you have to have play-makers. Aubrey is another play-maker on our team. Now with Madison Greene being out this year with another knee injury, she'll be thrust into the spotlight right away. But I find that young players grow the most when they have the most time to be able to do that on the floor.

We have high expectations for her. But she also have them for herself. It will be fun for you guys to watch her, and it will be much more fun for me to coach her this year.

Q. You mentioned integrity and legacy a lot. I do wonder how your mother, Pat Summitt or other coaches have influenced how you coach.

SHEA RALPH: Great question.

Thank you for the intro, Commissioner Sankey, because my mom was really good friends with Pat Summitt. That's not something a lot of people know. She also had a chance to be part of the team that played on international soil to represent the United States. It was a friendship that really gave me the opportunity to understand what was possible if you played women's college basketball or basketball at all, or that I could be an athlete as a young person.

Understanding what my mom had to do to get to that point, she'll tell stories like we all tell them: I had to walk through four feet of snow, drive the buses to every game.

I get to be part of something in college basketball for women that we don't have to do that. That is a direct reflection of the sacrifices that other women made for us, my mom being one of them, Pat Summitt being one of them. The investment they made and the belief they had that this could be something really special.

She did all of that without a tenth of what we get now. It's an honor for me to have her still. She moved to Nashville. It's an honor for me to bring her on every trip, travel the way we travel, experience what it looks like now in college women's basketball, because she is part of the foundation that was laid for us to be here.

It's meaningful to me. Our job is to win. We're college coaches, our job is to win. But the purpose that I have behind that is much bigger than that for me because of my mom and the other women that laid the foundation for me to even be standing here in front of you guys today talking about this.

Q. I want to ask you about Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda. Obviously came from Texas. Had some really critical moments for that Texas team last year. What are you

expecting from her?

SHEA RALPH: Great job with the pronunciation. It took us a while (smiling).

I have such high expectations for her, but not higher than she has for herself. When we thought about continuing to build a championship roster, Ndjakalenga was a critical piece for us because she has been where we want to go. She has that experience. She has had critical moments, right, critical moments as a player in making sure that Texas went to and had success in the NCAA tournament and the Final Four.

When we brought her to our team, I know she is wanting to have a bigger impact for her, but also having an impact of leadership on our team in the way we haven't had before because she's been there.

She's a player on our team that has been where we want to go and has been able to make an immediate impact just in that way, besides the fact that she's a really good basketball player, in the locker room, on the court, communication trust, accountability. She brings all those things with the experience.

Q. With the landscape changing so much in college basketball, how do you feel like NIL fits in with the new rev share structure?

SHEA RALPH: I'm a very, very lucky head coach. I have amazing leadership. I have Dr. Candice Storey Lee, our athletic director, who is arguably, but not to me, the best athletic director in the country, and the partnership that we have with Chancellor Daniel Diermeier in making sure our athletic department is infused with the resources we need to compete at the highest level.

Of course now that includes rev share and NIL. It also includes having brand-new facilities, being able to play the schedule that we play this year. We're going to Paris to kick off the season. We're going to the Virgin Islands, playing in New York in January against Michigan. They understand what it looks like, and they want to invest in a championship team that also operates with academic excellence, right? They've given me the opportunity to go out and recruit the best student-athletes in the country.

What it looks like at our university is we operate in that. We're going to bring the best student-athletes here, we're going to give them the best student-athlete college experience that we can, we're going to win.

And then Candice and Chancellor Diermeier are going to be able to give us the resources to be able to do that. I'm



excited to show people at Vanderbilt what it looks like to invest in women.

Q. You've talked a lot about foundation building this morning. Maybe speak to Sacha Washington, somebody that starts 70 games in a row, pretty vital to foundation building. What makes her special, one of better glue players in the SEC?

SHEA RALPH: The first thing that comes to mind in terms of her and what makes her really special is she's been here with me the entire time since we've been here. That does not happen a lot anymore. It has not been easy. Our first two years weren't great. They were in that we were going in the right direction, but we weren't getting to the NCAA tournament yet, we weren't winning a lot of games.

She has always been a believer in the process and the vision. She's also put everything that she has out on the line for us. Through thick and thin, successes and losses, it's almost like a marriage, right? Now she's not healthy last year, but I'm going to stay committed to you, too, because that is what integrity is.

It also shows her what it looks like to be bigger than something, what it looks like for someone to be a part of something that's bigger than themselves. I think that really is important and that level the commitment for her to us and us to her is what makes her special. It's also what makes her show up with joy. She's had a lot of, lot of adversity, a lot of adversity. We've had a lot of adversity together. One thing that we have done is enjoyed the process.

She puts a smile on everyone's face. She lights up the room when she walks into it. She is one of the hardest workers on the floor.

I cannot wait to have her back this year. It's no secret, we need size. She's going to have a force in the paint that we haven't had in the last year. She'll be able to give us that back this year.

Q. What's the best advice your mother gave you about athletics? What caught your attention about Mikayla Blakes when you were recruiting her?

SHEA RALPH: Wow, okay. The best advice? I know my mom is watching this, too.

I don't know if it was like she said it to me. It was more she gave me the opportunity to be myself. I think as a young person, when you look at that college athletics, women's basketball was dominated by Tennessee at that time. I think everyone in the state of North Carolina thought I was

going to go to Tennessee because my mom was friends with Pat Summitt or go to North Carolina because I grew up in North Carolina and my mom was an All-American there, the first one ever.

She would tell me every day, You have to make the choice for you. It can't be about me, about the state, about the people that are around us. You have to do the right thing for you because you're going to be the one that has to be there every single day. This is your life.

I think that's hard. I'm a parent myself now. I don't know that I realize how hard that might have been for her because I think a couple of those things were sure things in her eyes.

She gave me the opportunity to be myself, to make my own choices, and it laid the groundwork for me to grow up, learn what it looks like to maximize my truthful potential, create my own path. That's number one.

Mikayla Blakes, when we started recruiting her, she wasn't one of the top-10 players in the country. When I went to watch her... When you talk to her on the phone, you have plenty of opportunities to interview her, well-spoken, like a force, very present. She has a way about her that makes you understand what a special human being she is.

You do not look at her when you're interviewing her as the monster that she presents on the basketball court. When I first went to watch her play after having several conversations with her on the phone, I was blown away by her motor, her competitive fire, the way that she allowed herself to be coached, the way that she spoke to her teammates, the eye contact, the way she went off the floor and hugged her parents, hung out with the people on the sideline. She just represented something to me that you don't see a lot in great players.

There's lot of the talent in the country, players with skill. Mikayla has the intangible qualities that I have been fortunate enough to witness as a basketball coach and a player, and some of the best players I've ever seen play the game.

Now I get the honor and opportunity to help her develop those so she can maximize her truthful potential. That's what I saw right away. Her motor, her intangible qualities that I knew would separate her not from just being a good player to a great player, but maybe being one of the best players to ever play the game.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time this morning.

SHEA RALPH: Thank you so much.



