

2021 DI Women's Volleyball Championship - 1st & 2nd Round

Thursday, December 2, 2021

West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

Holloway Gymnasium

Illinois State Redbirds Coach Leah Johnson Kaitlyn Prondzinski Aliyah Moore

Press Conference

Purdue 25-21, 25-17, 25-11

Illinois State

LEAH JOHNSON: One, thank you to Purdue. You've hosted a great event thus far. It's been first class, the accommodations, the experience, the fans, phenomenal. So kudos to them, and I want to give from our program to the Purdue program our condolences for the loss of Mr. Shondell. We certainly are going to continue to keep him in our players.

About the match, I thought our team was prepared, gutsy, competitive. I think game plan less a couple errors, honestly I think we played as well if not better than them at certain points.

You know, I made a lineup flip in set two just to give them a different look because I didn't want them to get any serve-and-pass rhythm and I don't know if that worked against us or for them, but we're pretty even all the time so I never have any fear doing that, and we just couldn't get our rhythm back again.

But I think at the end of the day I think we won the serve-and-pass game, and that's something that I know will continue to get us back here year after year with such a young team, so I'm very proud of our Redbirds.

Q. Aliyah leads with nine kills. What does that say about a freshman in her first NCAA Tournament match that she's able to lead your team?

LEAH JOHNSON: She's a stud. No, she was



phenomenal. She was composed, opportunistic. When she had her opportunities she took advantage of it. I could see her fire.

Actually I was brainstorming ways to have her play on the outside all match after set one. But she's been putting in the work, and she's her harshest critic. All year she's kind of been battling herself, and I think that's only made her better. So long as we can keep her head at this game level in training, too, and as a freshman these are the things that you have to try to channel, and our job is to transfer that energy into practice so that training environment can continue to produce these results.

You know, her job is to be a stud. My job is to figure out how to help her repeat it, and so that's what we're going to keep doing. I'm so proud of her.

Q. You guys have a really young team and you were able to hang around with Purdue, especially in those first two sets. What does that say about the future and how bright it is?

LEAH JOHNSON: Yeah, Purdue is effectively -- they have a sixth-year setter. A sixth-year setter. They have fifth-year players. They're a semi-pro team playing in the college game right now. They're freaking good. There's a reason they're a 6 seed.

Then I've got a team of a sophomore, a freshman -- I have the youngest starting lineup in our league. We are effectively on average a second-year team by age. We were fearless. Like why wouldn't I be excited?

Again, I go back to set one, and I think if I don't do something stupid in set two and I stay out of their way, could have been a different game, because I think they were feeling the pressure and the stress, and we were feeling that, and that's how it is when you're the underdog. That's how it will be. They're the team that has to get through that first round and then they start thinking about the other teams, right, and I think we made it really hard for them to do that. With such a young team doing that, I'm excited to get back in the gym already.

Q. You game planned a lot for that middle attack down

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the center and it was quite effective early on in the beginning of the match but it kind of wore down as Raven Colvin, Jael Johnson, Grace Cleveland all got their shots in. Was that more of a talent thing deteriorating or was it kind of the game plan a little slipping and the objectives of it?

LEAH JOHNSON: I think when they found their middles they found them a lot in trans, not always in first ball because we were serving them off the net, and we got behind in the rally sometimes.

I'm sure other coaches might say it's talent. I think it's opportunity. You can hit high and hard and it's the same point. Yeah, they're very talented. I think they're exceptional. I thought 7, forgive me, I don't know names, I remember jersey numbers, I thought she was excellent, and I thought that was one of the better matches she's played even compared to scout.

But there wasn't anyone on the court we didn't think would score. We needed to go point for point in a side out game. We didn't need to worry about containing someone if we can just get our own points because clearly we have arms everywhere, and I think we demonstrated that.

Unfortunately Tam Otene had an injury during practice today to her hand, and over the course of the match I think they figured that out and exploited it, and so we couldn't get her grooving.

Outside of that, we're pretty talented, too. Sorry, I can't give you on that one.

Q. Kaitlyn and Aliyah, you guys at one point led the No. 6 seed in the entire NCAA Tournament. Going forward as young players, what kind of confidence does that give you heading into next season? You've also made four consecutive tournaments thanks to Coach Johnson.

KAITLYN PRONDZINSKI: I think it just fuels us in this off-season. Personally I haven't had an off-season yet in my two years playing here, and so after playing them, they're an amazing team and seeing how we can battle with them, I think it just fuels us and myself to work hard and to see how maybe next year when we get put in the same matchup again with another team, same caliber, like how it could turn out.

I think we're just excited. I'm upset, obviously, about the loss, but I'm more like keeping my head straight and like moving forward and just trying to plan out in the future. I think it's just more excitement.

Aliyah, what do you think?

ALIYAH MOORE: I do think it fuels us for the off-season, but coming into this game, nobody is expecting anything out of me or out of any of us. They were expecting us to lose, and that fired me up so much.

Being a small hitter, it's like going against like a wall, but I love it. That just fuels me so much more. The bigger the better because then I just get to exploit your weaknesses and you get to look down on me.

LEAH JOHNSON: I think it's important to point out -- I'm sorry I've got a mic so I'm going to take it. I think it's important to point out that she said we hadn't had an off-season yet. There's three players -- no, two players in our starting lineup -- three? Three players maybe that have actually gone through an off-season. That's it. We're sitting here having this conversation about having the lead in set one.

Purdue is freaking good. No secrets in this room. We all freaking know it. Like that's great. But the Redbirds are, too, and the score doesn't reflect how many swings they had to take to get each of those points. They just ended up winning consecutive long rallies in a row, and that's what separated them, and I hope it continues to separate them the whole tournament because if you're going to beat us, you'd better go win the darned thing, okay?

Q. Aliyah, what's the experience been like so far in your first tournament?

ALIYAH MOORE: It's been amazing. It just hit me an hour before the game. I was like, whoa, I used to watch the NCAAs on TV and now I'm in it. Especially some of the Purdue girls, I would watch them. So it's like, wow, I'm blocking you now and I used to look at you on TV. It's just amazing.

Then the competitive fire in me just comes out, and I've got nothing to lose. I'm just going.

Q. Coach, how was Tam's hand? Was this an injury that would have kept her sidelined in a normal game?

LEAH JOHNSON: No, no. She -- I'm going to go and tell the story because I think it's kudos to her, right? She doesn't care, I promise.

We were doing a blocking drill and just caught her finger wrong and her finger was completely bent sideways at 1:00 p.m. today, and she went to the training room, they put it back together. The team doc here, who was phenomenal, what a great person. I'm just going to call him Doctor. And

she got it buddy taped and she played the whole game.

Eventually they knew that she was favoring it, and so they started serving her high, and she's really good at passing overhead, and she wasn't able to do that, and that's where you saw her get aced. She would not get aced on that ball normally or certain swings where she was maybe a little shy with that hand because she's in a ton of pain. It happened seven hours ago. Her finger was sideways.

She's freaking tough. You guys don't even know. You have no idea what she's even gone through. This young woman has a -- she's a freaking fighter. She has a chronic illness that sidelines her two to three days a week. She barely trained for three weeks last year, and she's the Player of the Year in our conference. You have no clue how tough she really is. It's awesome.

Q. From that, how do you think her play was this season considering she tied the record for kills in a single season for a sophomore?

LEAH JOHNSON: By a sophomore, yeah.

Q. In total this season, what do you have to say about Tam being the player of your team for this full season?

LEAH JOHNSON: Yeah, I think she's humble. I think she's unassuming in personality. I think she doesn't know how good she is.

I think we all know how good she is, but I think she raises the level in our gym. I think Aliyah goes to that next level in a game because she knows Tam can too, and KP has to step up because she's blocking her every day in practice and vice versa.

There's just a -- we have a lot of talent, and we need to get an off-season under our belt, and this is awesome.

I am so pissed because I hate losing. I freaking hate losing. But I love the opportunity to get better, and we're going to stay in the process and we're going to grind and we're going to grind and we're going to grind and we're going to love each other the whole time, because I love my team. I'm so proud of my team.

Q. Kaitlyn, what are some things you've taken away from two tournaments now in your first two seasons?

KAITLYN PRONDZINSKI: Volleyball is really good. It's just like -- I feel like there's -- I don't know. I honestly don't have words for it. It's just like an incredible experience that I will never take for granted, and I just want to keep coming back and I just want that first-round win.

There's things we could have done differently like in the game, but at the end of the day I just think this off-season is going to be huge for us to like grind and make some improvements, like just physically, not even volleyball wise, just like as a person, like jumping better, getting some spikes -- I need to get stronger. I'm so tiny.

LEAH JOHNSON: She needs to get stronger?

KAITLYN PRONDZINSKI: I do. No, literally, so I think then it'll change the way that this tournament goes for us, but I can't even explain it. It's just such a crazy experience. Just like Aliyah, like I used to watch this when I was younger. Now that I'm here it just feels crazy, and yeah, I'm so happy.

LEAH JOHNSON: I've got one more thing to say. I want to thank all of you. Our student media, you're the -- I'm trying not to curse here. You guys are amazing. They have a bad example in me.

But you travel all the way up here. You've been at four straight NCAA tournaments with us. You put in the time. You make Redbird volleyball relevant. There's so much hype on our campus surrounding our program, our people, and it's about our people, and you guys are part of that. Our band, our fans, our community. We filled this place. It didn't feel like -- I didn't even hear Purdue. It was about the court and the energy and I just want to thank you guys.

And the Purdue media, as well, phenomenal. Thank you for all you're doing to cover our sport and make this elite and this opportunity elite.

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