

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 3, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Washington State Cougars

Kamie Ethridge

Charlisse Leger-Walker

Bella Murekatete

Ula Motuga

Postgame Press Conference

Washington State - 61, Colorado - 49

THE MODERATOR: We welcome Washington State. Coach, we'll start with an opening statement and then take questions.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Just obviously can't even express how thrilled I am for our program and for these players and everybody that's involved with our program. We have worked a long time to put ourselves in a position to advance, and to do it to the championship is really exciting.

I saw some announcers and they were like, my gosh, what would y'all do if y'all won, and it's kind of laughable, but when it's unexpected it's really refreshing to see just players just have so much joy in doing something that, again, people don't expect. And also you know it's fun to watch 'em go, we expect it now and we need to do that in the future.

So really proud and excited for them and what's to come. Certainly was very impressed with Colorado and JR and her staff and what they do. They just make the game so hard and make you pay for mistakes. I thought they were just as tough as they could be against us and really wish them very much, I hope they have a great tournament run just like everyone in the PAC.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions?

Q. Clock hit zero, you guys realize you're going to the championship, first time in school history. What were the emotions like for all you guys, just the feeling that you guys are playing for the first championship in school history?



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KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I don't know that we really realized it right now. I was just amazed at the tears in our locker room and from our older players. They have gone through so much and they have come out on the other side of it. We had losing records when Ula got here and she chose a program that was at the bottom of the league almost, and nothing came easy, and yet think of that journey five years later and what she stands for and represents and the shots she makes and the leadership she has and what she's done for our program.

So it's just unbelievably fun to see their tears of joy and reflection on what they have accomplished. So I hope, this is the greatest ride I've been on with a team, so I'm going to just sit back and keep riding it.

Q. Bella, as those last couple of minutes, like how stressful was it to get to zero? Like, they made a run at you, you guys had built it back up to 10. There was the play where Vonleh blocked you and it went straight to Ula, and Ula buries a three to get it back. But those last minutes as they're ticking off the clock, were you nervous about that?

BELLA MUREKATETE: That's actually a play. I'm joking. First of all, I just want to give a shoutout to Vonleh. She's a really a heck of a player. She's really good at defense and offense and really hard to guard. I want to give her a shoutout.

It was the most stressful moment ever. Just the fact that I'm still so speechless that, like, I don't know. I don't know. It was really stressful and I'm just so glad that the clock went zero zero. I don't know, I'm just so blessed and thankful that the clock says zero zero, honestly, yeah. Sorry.

Q. They go on that run in the third quarter and it's tied going into the fourth and you guys probably could have just sort of sank, but you pushed through and the fact that you go on that 12-2 run with Charlisse being on the bench the entire time during that run, how much trust do you have in your team and trust did you guys have in each other that we can keep powering through



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even when we get punched back after you guys had punched in that first half?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, we don't like to take Charlisse, or I don't, out very much. She kind of got I think hit across the nose and was really kind of, couldn't see or, so she needed to come out. I don't know that she would have come out any other reason. But I do think it's great to show that our team is growing around her. I think we showed it even when we lost those four games when she wasn't with this team. We competed so well, the bench players in their roles got extended, they got good minutes. I think it helped AT more than anyone on our team because she had to step in to some real leadership and play-calling and a lot of responsibility.

So to see, I just think, I think our team isn't afraid of that now and that's a sign of a team that's growing. And, again, I think it takes some heat off of some of these players that have to play so many minutes that -- and I still think because those players are still young in their game they can keep getting better even for us this year.

So I think it's a great thing for us to have a little bit more depth so we can survive when Charlisse gets hit across the nose and has to come out. But that's about the only reason she might.

Q. Charlisse, when I saw you in Arizona I asked you the same question: What's the difference when you were gone, now you're back, and you said something to me along the lines of, Well, we're going to come out of this stronger. Do you feel like that's truly what's happened?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I hundred percent I do. I think when I was gone for the four-game period a lot of different people had to step up in different ways. The team got better when I wasn't in the gym and when they don't have to hear my voice all the time or I'm calling out plays or things like that. So I honestly do think that it just helped us, especially down the stretch now. We all know each other so well, we know how to play with each other, we know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and when I'm kind of put back into that lineup, I don't have to, like Coach E was saying, necessarily do as much or bring people along because other people are stepping up already into those roles.

I have so much trust and faith in our team and people who come in off the bench. We're a lot deeper this year and people are playing different roles, and I'm just so happy that everybody is stepping into those roles and we're collectively stronger and better as a team. Obviously you can see that in these last few games.

Q. You talked about the emotion a little bit of what this is. But a first tournament championship game can alter a program. Can you just kind of reflect for a second on the legacy that this group will have no matter what happens on Sunday and the path that they're paving for future Cougars?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Yeah, that is the greatest thought going in my mind right now. I just think back on when we got these guys to sign with us all they had was a vision, all they had was our words of what we could accomplish over time, and the vision for them individually of what they could become in our program.

So the trust and the jumping in when it's not the coolest thing ever to do, and they don't care because they love it and they love our program and they are our program, they represent it so much. And everything we want to be is because of these people up here and what they represent.

So it is beyond belief that we are here, knowing where we've come from, and I think that's where all the appreciation comes from all of us and why it's so touching to us.

Q. I'm sure this is a player question. How important is it that Shania Twain is here on Sunday?

ULA MOTUGA: Incredibly important. So if anyone knows Shania, please, tell her to come.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I thought you were best friends with her.

ULA MOTUGA: She's actually my auntie. She doesn't know it, but she's part Samoan.

Q. JR talked about how effectively you guys were able to guard them, especially a lot of their actions in the half court. What are some things that you're looking for or keying on in those sets that you really try to take away from them and make it hard on 'em?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, Sherrod killed us in the game at Colorado. And we know each other so well and you have a scheme and you want to play it a certain way. It's not going to work a hundred percent of the time.

But I just thought we really kept people in front of us better than we did the last time we played them. We didn't put 'em at the free throw line as much. Vonleh got kind of deep positions at times just because she's just that good a player and we don't have the size to match with that. So we had to give up some of that to guard their perimeter

players.

But just, it just is another credit to our team. They're so good at the scouts, they're so good at studying them, they're so good at watching film as opposed to practicing, because obviously we didn't practice much today, to get it right. Clearly, again, the third time we have seen 'em, so we knew most of the stuff that they were doing.

Honestly, by this time of the year there's not anything anyone's doing that you haven't had to guard, other than the fact that I don't think we have to ever guard Sherrod again. She's pretty unique and so very, very difficult to scheme against.

But it's a credit to our team. I keep saying it, we are better this year because we're better defensively consistently, we're deeper, and we rebound better. Those things travel and those things help you win in post-season. We're proving that out this year and hopefully our offense is really still getting better and we'll have a chance to continue to play.

Q. Ula, coming back this season for the extra year, now you're seeing the dividends pay off. What does it mean to you to have the success like this in this extra year after your long journey as a Cougar?

ULA MOTUGA: Like I said last night, I think if you would have to have told freshman me that five years down the track we would be here, I would say, there's no way, no possible way. What Coach E's been able to do, her vision that she had, and then obviously recruiting great players, like Bella, Charlissee, and everyone in that locker room now, it just shows how much we, how much belief we have in her and how, I guess how together we are and how bought in we are.

A big part of me coming back was because I thought that we could do something better than last year. We bowed out in the second round against Utah and obviously last night we were able to find some success against them. That was huge. That was probably a turning point for me. I'm just grateful to be here, grateful to have great teammates who are all bought in, from 1 to 13. Everyone's entirely bought into this thing and obviously great coaches that have a vision and pushing this vision and, yeah, just super grateful for everything.

Q. To follow up, where did the love for Shania Twain come from? And then when that Shania Twain song came on after the game when you're all jumping around and dancing, just the emotions of that moment, because I know you guys had the tweet from her earlier, just where all of that came from.

ULA MOTUGA: I think it's a common knowledge, but we are a big karaoke team. We love karaoke and I know we talk about it a lot. But we really do love singing and making fun of each other when someone gets up to perform a song.

But, yeah, Shania Twain, Man! I feel like a woman! is in my top three, and then I played it and everyone was like, oh, this is cool. And then the coaches got on board and it just became a thing and it's something that obviously Let's Go Girls is like come on, let's go, let's do this. And yeah, it just brings us together, creates a lot of fun and a great environment going into a game and obviously celebrating afterwards.

Q. There are some teams that are awaiting their fate for the NCAA tournament here in this conference. A 5 and a 7 playing in the final here with the amount of ranked teams that are in it, what does that say about this conference? And if you were make being a case on behalf of some of those teams that are on the bubble, like maybe say an Oregon, what case would you make for those teams here from the conference that are on the bubble and why deserve to be in?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, again, we've been in a lot of different positions and said the same thing when we were a little bit on the bubble. It is just a phenomenal league. It is with phenomenal coaches. Oregon, I mean, UW finished the season unbelievably well. Obviously USC. There's teams that I think are given that they're in. It would be mind blowing to me if Oregon didn't make it. They are just dangerous.

Again, we've played non-conference teams, we've played everybody in this league. It is brutal top to bottom. You just don't have a night off. You can get beat by anybody and I think you maybe can beat anybody. So again, and I just keep going to, I just hope we get in because I think when we get in we prove ourselves by how many games we win in the NCAA tournament, and that should be, you know, that should carry some weight over the course of time, not just this year.

And I really do believe that Oregon should, deserves it and should get in and clearly we want to just, we want to win this thing, so we are automatic and we don't have to talk about it anymore.

Q. Can you just describe what the vision was that Kamie talked to you about? I mean, it might have, like right now maybe that seems very distant, but what was it that sold you on coming to Washington State?



BELLA MUREKATETE: Well, I just really, they just told me the vision and I just really believed because I really didn't have anything. I just had to believe. And they believed in me since, like no one ever, ever knew me. Laurie back there believed in me. She's been working with me since literally the first day I stepped my foot at WSU. Coach E been telling me how good I could be.

They have been painting that picture in my head. I just kept believing, I kept believing, knowing that my moment was going to come and I'm just so thankful to God and so thankful to the coaches, to the staff, how much they believed in me, and not just me, the whole group believed.

Ula told me, my freshman year what when I got here, Ula wasn't here, was playing in Australia. Because she wasn't here, she texted me, she said, Put the work in and, before she even met me everybody in the whole team literally believed that I could be better. I'm just so thankful. And I saw the vision and I just kept believing and just kept believing and I'm just grateful enough that I'm where I am right now. So thank you Laurie and Coach E and Coach B.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think to add on top of that, when I was being recruited by Laurie and Coach E, the vision was let's turn this program around. Let's do something that hasn't been done before. And you have an opportunity to be a part of that and be a part of that success that obviously Bella was talking about that we've had.

For me, that was really exciting. A lot of people have the chance to go to programs that are already great. They're already on the map. You are going to be a part of the team and people already know about you and everything like that. But I think this opportunity in itself was so special because we were so irrelevant, you could say. Nobody was talking about us at all.

I think my freshman year when I came in, what, we were picked 12th, I think, and then, yeah, right? 12th. And we proved people wrong that year too. We finished higher than what we were picked to be. So I think for me that was just the best part of that decision was joining the ride with Coach E, with Laurie, with the players who were already here, and really having the opportunity to prove to the world that we are here to play, we are here to compete.

The PAC 12, like Coach E said, is so brutal, it's so hard. But on the flip side of that you get great basketball games every single day. For me personally that's what I wanted to come in and be a part of. So that was the vision for me and no regrets at all. I'm so happy to be here. I'm happy to be a Cougar.

Q. Can you speak to the implementation of that vision and the day-to-day support that Coach E and Coach Laurie provide to you and the whole staff?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, Ula can probably speak to the earlier parts too because she was obviously here from the get-go.

But for me when I came in obviously we were still in a rebuilding phase. We were still trying to figure out where our strengths were in our team, what our identity in the PAC wanted to be. So I think in the gym every day Coach E would always tells us, You're going to get beat if you don't put in the work every single day. And it's not just showing up to training and doing the two hours. It's getting extra shots up in the gym.

Laurie is one of the most committed people I've ever been around my whole life. Any time you want to get up and shoot she's there, 3 a.m. to 12 p.m. like, it's crazy. That's not even -- 12 p.m. is lunch, isn't it? You knew what I meant. You knew what I meant. (Laughing.) 12 a.m.

But, yeah, just that stuff. It's all the little details, it's who you want to be, not just as a player, but who you want to be for your team. I think the biggest part of that was building that culture and having the leadership of people really bought in to want our program to succeed.

So I think just the reminders every day in the gym, like this is what it takes to get us to the next level. And it takes awhile. This is my third year here, but it's taken three or four, four, five years to get to this point. But we definitely couldn't have done that without all of that little stuff being reminded to us every single day.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, like Charlissee said, all that and also like how much they care about you off the court as well. Because they know you can put the work in, but just what type of person you are off the court also matters as well. Coach E keeps you honest. Laurie keeps you honest. Coach P keeps you honest. They know what I'm talking about. But they just really care about you so much. Mentally, physically, emotionally, everything off the court. And they're literally, they're like your parents. Because we're away from our parents so, yeah, meetings every day with Coach E. Shout out. Yeah. (Laughing.) But, yeah, I'm so thankful the fact that I just have them, I can always count on them and always count on Coach E telling me everything I don't want to hear. But I'm just really blessed and thankful enough that I chose the right people and I'm so happy to be a Cougar.

ULA MOTUGA: Can you please repeat it?

Q. (No microphone.)

ULA MOTUGA: I think, for me personally, I think I said it obviously a million times, but I committed without even seeing WSU. That was purely based on how much I was like impressed by what Coach E was telling me, what Laurie was telling me. And I was like, what they're going to do, like they're the people that I want to be with. And my parents are saying, These are the people that we trust with you for four years. And I was like, Yeah, all right, sold. Coming. And then obviously she tells me, Drinks on you, I'm going to WSU. So I go home, commit and then come to a town where there's nothing but wheat fields, as you know, and into a program where there wasn't a lot of success. But part of the implementation was just how much knowledge they have of the game. I mean, obviously Coach E's one of the most decorated players and Laurie, insane shooter, one of the best shooters ever. And then obviously you have Coach P who, she's Coach P, she's one-of-a-kind. The knowledge is insane. The personal connection that you can have with her. And then our other assistants, Jason and Camille both have a wealth of knowledge for basketball and part of it was just believing in everything that they said and that they were doing.

As time went on, when we went from nine wins my freshman year to another nine my sophomore year and then to like seeing where we are now, I think it's crazy. The proof is in the pudding pretty much. And I know that our freshmen don't really understand it because they have walked into a program where winning is a thing now. Obviously they're at their first PAC 12 tournament and they're embracing every good thing that comes with being able to have the chance to play in the tournament championship. But we know firsthand, I mean, what it's been like. The coaches are insanely smart and have a great knowledge of the game and they just know how to connect with us on personal levels to be able to push us in the right direction that obviously put us in the place to where we are today.

Q. You guys probably have one of the most international rosters in the country. With everybody coming from different places, being far from home I just wonder, how does that play into how close a team you are? Because people are coming from a lot of different cultures and you've got languages and all those things. But everybody, you've all pulled it together in this way and I just want to somebody to sort of speak to the dynamic of that.

CHARLISSA LEGER-WALKER: I think it's really special to be a part of a team with so many international people. I think there's a lot of good things that come from that. One of the things especially for me is we all kind of are going

through the same thing in terms of, we're so far away from home. We can't just pick up the phone and say, I want to come home for a weekend. Just do that whenever we want. So that really forces us to get in our teammates and really hang out as a team and have each other's backs and kind of lean on each other's shoulders a bit and understand that we're all kind of on this journey together. I think all of that chemistry that we build from that translates into the basketball and on the court. And so I think that's definitely a special thing with our team. Especially our freshmen coming in. We have international freshmen as well. I think that they feel really supported and they know coming in that we have such an extensive roster of international students. They know that just our experience that we've had we can kind of give to them. So I think that it's really cool and it's really special. And you also have a lot of, on the basketball court, you have a lot of different styles and international players. I played international basketball my whole life and there's just so many different styles of play and the knowledge people have. And when you bring that all together into one team it's pretty special. Especially when you get things connecting and going.

I think, even our freshmen coming in, I'm thinking of AT in particular, her just professionalism coming in as a freshman is not something that you see every day. I think a lot of that is credited to her playing internationally and having that experience with playing on pro teams. And that's unique to her. But just her experience coming in, the different knowledge that she has, especially as a point guard, is insane. So, yeah, I think it's a really, I think it's more positives than anything else, having an international roster and again credit to Coach E, keep recruiting globally. We love it. But, yeah.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Yeah, you know, we've said it a lot. I don't know that we -- it's not that we haven't tried to get four- and five-star American recruits on campus. We haven't been received real well. You know, whether that's a reputation or the tradition or where we live or where we are. Other than Charlissee, most of our roster we competed for with Mid Majors recruiting in early years. Even some of those we lost to Mid Majors. So part of that is just we felt like we could go to another country and get a top player because they make decisions different than Americans do. They build relationships and they have to trust the people that they're coming to play for. They want the opportunity to play in a best league, one of the best leagues and have the opportunity to help and turn around a program. So we've been received really well to a lot of the really good players overseas. So we want that. We're still pursuing that as much as we possibly can. But we're also getting a little bit more traction with people in the States and the Pacific Northwest. We hope to continue to do that. But bottom line is, you know, we love the -- there's kids that fit



with us. Our standard, how we do things, kind of people we are, our values. And that's the biggest issue is get the right people that fit with who you are, where you are and the kind of program that you want. And if you do that, good things will come. So the quality of people and the character of people is really what we want. Non-negotiable. And clearly the talent, trying to get a little bit higher talent every year and every recruiting class is something we strive to do and I think we're continuing to do as we move forward.

Q. I want to go back into the game quick. The third quarter was such a steep fall off. The beginning of the fourth quarter was such a serious incline. Between the third and fourth quarter going to talk to the team what's going on in your mind, what did you say to them, how did they receive it. Kind of just take us through coaching in that specific moment.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I'm not sure I should answer. I'm not a -- I don't curse. I don't use that kind of bad language. But I said on the TV, I am probably harsh and demanding and I have great expectations on our team. So it was urgent to not keep self inflicting ourselves with turnovers or bad decisions or giving in to the pressure that we were facing. And typical Colorado and what they do to you. It felt like there were seven players of them on the court and we were just kind of out of sync and out of rhythm. Which, again, momentum in a game happens all the time.

I just think we fell back on some experiences we've had. We've been down and we have come back. We've had leads and lost 'em. And those are the, we talked about it before the game, those are the scars that you build over the course of a season and as you grow as a team. You're going to come across 'em. So you might as well face it. And that was the message: Toughen up, guard and rebound and we got to figure this offense out. Because we felt like we could get to the rim. We felt like they were being overly aggressive. We just had to get the ball in good spots on the floor. But the biggest message was, we're better than we're playing, so toughen up and finish this game with 10 minutes. I just remember them yelling, 10 minutes, 10 minutes, we good shots this. But we've done that, we've responded a lot of times the right way. And it makes me really proud that -- don't forget we had a lead. We built a lead. Which shows a lot of things about us. Yes, we lost a lead. That's not so good. But then to respond the right way and build that lead back up, man, that's big time for us.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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