

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Washington State Cougars

Kamie Ethridge

Charlisse Leger-Walker

Bella Murekatete

Ula Motuga

Postgame Press Conference

Washington State - 65, UCLA - 61

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

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I don't really know what to say, but it sounds sweet, that title for us. I would have never thought we could do it. I don't even think when I took the job I thought this was possible in this kind of league and these kind of coaches and the athletes that we're going up against and players.

So it just is a testament to anything's possible. That's what our head football coach just said in there. If you get the right people in place that believe and work and are committed to each other you can accomplish amazing things together.

So couldn't be more proud. Three special people up here. Also want to just, the other two seniors, Grace Sarver and Emma Nankervis, what those guys have done for our program over the years is pretty short of a miracle. So really proud of the upperclassmen on this team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions?

Q. Before we get to the three ladies, I think they're names come up first but Astera, off the bench her defensive tenacity today, her efficiency at both ends, you could equally say that she was just as valuable as anyone else on the court today, especially locking down Kiki.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Yeah. Well, she's not really a



freshman, and we knew it the first day she got to campus, which was in August. She didn't come to summer school. She left home at 14 to go play in Spain. So that takes a special kind of kid that goes and does that and responsibility and playing on a pro team that, again, accountability and responsibility and just maturity, and she plays with that. She just plays a lot older than she is. She's got it, her IQ. Like, we had all the plays in or a bunch of plays in and it's overwhelming for most of our freshmen and she walks in and goes, okay, yeah, I'm good.

So just has a great IQ. Again, just tough as nails. Proud of her performance and really happy for her. Her aunt, who lives in the States, came and surprised her this morning and came to the finals. So just getting a little bit of home here for her. So she's a great player for us and is going to be a great player for a long time.

Q. Charlisse, climbing that ladder and cutting down a net, describe the feeling?

CHARLISSA LEGER-WALKER: Never would have thought we would be doing that. We've watched teams do that in the past or especially the last three years. That moment just felt so surreal to get up there, cut down the net, actually soak in that we're champs. It's just been such a process.

The journey that we've been on, especially throughout the season, we've had a lot of ups and downs and to come out with this win, this championship, it means so much to so many people. Just so grateful to be a part of that.

BELLA MUREKATETE: I know it may be my last in the PAC-12, obviously, but I know it's not going to be their last. So, yeah.

ULA MOTUGA: Yeah, I was actually nervous because I didn't know how to do that. It was like be careful so you don't fall down the ladder.

But it was just an amazing feeling. Like Charlisse said, we watched a lot of teams do that in the past like years we've been at WSU. But we've earned this moment. We've earned every single thing that has happened to us the past



week here. Every one of us, the whole team put the work in. So it's an amazing feeling to feel that the work we put is just finally showing up and paying off.

Q. I want to ask about Charlissee's growth over the time that she's been at WSU to go from where she was as a freshman to now being the PAC-12 tournament Most Outstanding Player, just how you have seen her develop, and obviously you had Crystal, but she's a very different player, just where she's come from to where she is now how you've seen her grow both as a player and as a leader?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, I personally don't think Charlissee has gotten much better in the sense that she was a stud when she walked in. We didn't have as many pieces around her, but IQ-wise, leadership, maturity, voice in the locker room, there was just character across the table. You just never have to spend one second on any of that. She's just high character in everything that she does, grades, with her professors. She's just an amazing student-athlete.

I think that where we -- we had a chance this summer to keep her. She wanted to be here this summer. So it's true, probably growing up she plays a lot more five on five in Summers and plays on national teams and sometimes she might not get as much individual work. We looked at some statistics for her and wanted to improve some of those things, some of her shooting percentages, and just off the bounce, and things like that.

We're really that, I think that helped. I think Laurie Koehn, my associate head coach, just does an amazing job in player development. I think that obviously is a growth for her, maybe that's the one area that I think she can continue to get better as an individual player.

But team-wise, leadership, work ethic, commitment to the program, bought all in. She was a star from the moment she got here and that's a credit to her mama and her daddy and her family and her culture and her sisters, and she's a leader. She's a leader on and off the court.

Now I would say, Crystal's voice was loud, and so Charlissee probably didn't have as loud a voice, but I've said it a lot, they were far enough apart that this is Charlissee's voice. Like, this is her natural, the way she is now. She probably didn't quite do as much when Crystal was around. But this, she didn't have to change. She just walked into what she really is as a leader and her voice and directing and coaching and coaching me and telling me what needs to be done. And I just, I'm just as fortunate as could be to be able to coach her.

Q. Charlissee, I think when you were on that riser and you were handed the trophy there wasn't a soul in the arena whose heart you didn't touch the. From the moment you threw the ball up to cutting the net down, can you just talk about honoring your grandmother's memory, and if I may ask, what her name is.

CHARLISSEE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, her name is that's my mom's mom. And, yeah, she obviously passed away earlier this year in the middle of the season. A big shock, really. It wasn't really expected and that was really hard for me, having to kind of go -- I found out in the middle of a road trip, I think it was Oregon State. We won that game and on such a high and then she passed away that night. Found out then and had to play the Oregon game. Didn't really want to let the team know at that point just so they didn't have to kind of worry about it, and then flew home straight after that game.

So I think just that whole period -- after Christmas I also went home. She was sick, so I went and visited her. That was the second time I went home. But, yeah, it was a lot for me. Obviously, very close with her, but I'm just grateful that I got to go home. Again, that's part of the reason why I came to this program because Coach E and her staff, they treat you as people first and there was no way they were obviously going to stop me from going home. The girls, before they -- in that locker room after that game, Ula said, We all have your back, we love you, go home do what you need, stay as long as you need, and then like obviously don't worry about us, at the end of the day, you're a human first, that type of thing, and you need to go and be with your family.

So I'm just very grateful that I have a team like that, who cares about that side of you and allowed me to do that. Then just coming back obviously just trying to get back into the rhythm of things it can be so hard, especially in the middle of conference play. Just the feel of the game is so different. But coming back into the team I knew they had my back and none of them were going to get on me for, I don't know, for losing fitness or things that you just, you know, have to figure out when you do things like that.

But this whole tournament I, think she's, my nana's been looking over me, and my whole family's had my back. A ton of messages coming in through saying she's proud of me. I know she is. But, yeah, this one was definitely for her and for my family back home.

Q. This is the first women's PAC-12 championship in any sport in school history. I wonder if you could just talk about what that means to you to accomplish that. And then for Kamie, Cori Close said something interesting about how this team reminds her of what

you accomplished with Deb Patterson at Kansas State. Do you see a parallel between what you were able to do there and what you've done here?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, again, I am so grateful for the time that I spent as an associate head coach at K-State working for Deb Patterson and worked for some unbelievable people, Jane Albright and Jim Foster, but 18 years at K state and, yeah, it was, you know, trying to build that program in the Big-12 when it was not very good, and we did some amazing things. You learn so much by being an associate -- not being the head coach. I think probably people thought, what in the world, how long are you going to stay an associate head coach, but I really think I was trained so well to become a head coach. Being patient sometimes in a different role, I think that helps me as a head coach too.

So I think I learned an unbelievable amount and I think I was really prepared to be a head coach and there's so many parallels to how we, character-wise, and how we built that program at K-State and learned everything that I kind of know from, if it's Coach Conrad and Jim Foster, but certainly Deb Patterson was a huge, and is still to our program a huge asset and peer and wise.

I think some people make mistakes these days not having someone maybe older on your staff that has no agenda other than to tell you, you know, you shouldn't do that and you should do that and looks at it from a different viewpoint. A lot of young coaches, I think, make mistakes of getting too many yes people around 'em. So I think it's great fit for our program now, but, yeah, you learn from the people that taught you and really proud of our staff here.

BELLA MUREKATETE: I think it's huge. If you know Pullman, you know it's a town that's not many, I think the city population's about 30,000, 32,000 and or 25- to 27,000 are students. So it's a very small town. I think one of the things with that is that it can be very hard to recruit to a small town. It's not the most glitzy, glamor city. You don't have the best, I guess, facilities and stuff. But if you're coming to WSU it's because you believe in your coaches, you believe that you can improve, and you love the team that you're going to.

I think that's where our success has come from is, I mean, we're a bunch of international students. Like Coach E has said in the past, we don't really know the college system that well, but we came here based on the fact that we all loved these coaches that we have and we all believe that they could help us improve as people and as athletes. I think what we've been able to do is a testament to that, is that our coaches have just really brought us all together, created a vision for us, and I think with enough buy-in from

all the right players it obviously led to a lot of success.

So hopefully this is definitely not going to be the last and there's going to be many championships won by WSU in the future.

Q. So I want to understand the football coach, your football coach was here to talk to your team. Who is here, who have you heard from already, which family members have been able to make the trip. I just want you to paint me a picture of what you think is going on here and maybe in Pullman.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Our WSU president of all WSU systems is here, Kirk Schulz, and Noel, his wife and professor and First Lady, and then obviously, Pat Chun, Anne McCoy's been here, my boss, and we have just people from Cougar Athletic Fund. We have our ticket people. Bill Stevens came up with, and he's head of media. My mom is sitting next to you. That's my mom. That's my person, Mitzi.

And just the support. I got so many texts and messages from like all the sports. All the sports sent something this morning to us. It was hilarious. Our men's cross country team actually sang Shania's song to us. And it was a classic. All just, I mean, again, I think that's the uniqueness of -- and it says a lot about Pat Chun. He hires great coaches. We have great rapport and support for one another. We all know the difficulties of our jobs and it is, it's unique, I think, in how much we care for each other. And Jake Dickert, I mean, that guy is amazing for any coach that wants, needs help, wants help, wants to be around just high energy and just a great vision for the program.

So I just can't say enough about it. I think the people are why kids should choose institutions. We've got the best people in the country.

Q. I believe this was the first title game without a top-4 seed and you guys were the lowest seed to ever win the PAC-12 tournament. What can you say about this tournament? And this game in particular, what does it say about the depth of this conference?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I think that's it. I mean, we've said it all year long and everybody has, every coach has said that, it's just been a gauntlet of who you play. I remember we had like eight games left and we were teetering on is there any way we can get in, and I don't know what we're going to do. But if we go 6-2, we'll get in. And it's just like, that's at USC, at -- you start naming all the places you're going and you're like, yeah, no one's going 6-2 in that gauntlet.



But it's a credit to the traditions of this conference and the coaches, the support, the people are invested in women's basketball, the PAC-12 is invested in women's basketball, our network, the commissioner, Theresa, who is over women's basketball, it is first class and they value women's basketball. I think that's why you get so many great coaches and programs that are just, they're some of the best in the country, and my hope is that we get eight in and that we advance and advance and just prove it over and over and over that this league is for real and you just can't, the facts don't lie. It is top to bottom the best conference in the country.

Q. The last few days the word vision keeps coming up. I was wondering maybe if you can think back five years of just what was that and how did you articulate it to your recruits?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, I was fortunate I was four years at Northern Colorado where I got my start as a head coach and in that fourth year, we won a regular season championship outright and then we won the tournament, and then we were a 10 seed in the NCAA, which was unheard of at Big Sky. Played Michigan and lost to them, but beat LSU and DePaul on the road and Florida Gulf Coast with this gritty little team. So we had proven that you could take something and in three to four to five years if we just stick to the plan, and I think that's the point. We can make these kids better if they stick to the plan and if they commit to the plan and if they buy in.

And it's nothing sexy. It's get in the gym and work and don't settle for being what you, you know, you can be better than you were yesterday. We're going to demand it and we're going to want it and we're going to expect it, especially from the people who come to you and go, I want to be great. If you say to us that you want to be great, then we're going to put a great plan in front of you.

Again, not everybody comes in as committed, but by the time they end, they are the rock stars and such solid people and leaders for our program that it elevates everybody. And the freshmen are better now because of this kind of leadership that we have.

And the coaches, I say it all the time, we used to be, when we got there, we used to be like the police, behavior police, like, that's not good behavior, why did you roll your eyes, that's not this, and all the things that we're trying to develop and do we sit around and we were talking about those kinds of things.

Now these guys do it. They're in charge and they speak because it's their program and they want the standard to

be the standard and everybody's got to rise to that. So that's when you know you have it is when you get the people that are in the program and in the locker room and you don't have to be there anymore.

Q. What did you see that maybe demanded your attention of how the game was going to play out and what needed to unfold for your team?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I think, if I think back to halftime, Coach E said one of our coaching staff said, mentioned that UCLA is so good in the second half, we just have to be ready to take punches and roll with the ups and downs of the game that naturally come with basketball. I think going on into that third and fourth quarter, like you can see in the score it was close. It was two points in at each quarter.

I think the biggest thing for us was just being able to stay in the moment and not let things get too high up or get too bogged down about things that were going on. I think the experience that we have on our team right now and the leadership that we have helps with that a lot. So I think every timeout or every time we came back on to the court there was something being said, like, we've got this, we just need to like just focus on this play right here, focus on our next play, or just stay positive, stay together. All little things that we say to each other to keep us in the moment I think really helps.

That was just kind of it going into the third and fourth quarter is believe in yourselves, believe that we can stick in this game and grind it out. We know that they're going to get some momentum swings here and there but it's really just how we respond to that and come out on the other end of that. So, yeah, I would just say that.

Q. Coach, you talked about that championship at Northern Colorado. How does this compare for you this championship, winning this tournament with this team versus the way you guys did it at Northern Colorado?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, it's similar in a million ways. We watched, I watched, I mean you want to talk about, we're kind of rug rats a little bit, but that team was some rug rats. Like, you know, we really -- and we had to grow competitiveness. We had to grow toughness. Because they just really didn't have that. Most of these guys, I mean, it's another level of talent. It's another level usually of mindset and elite length and bodies and potential. But similar -- and we did it the same way. The standard was still going to be the standard and everybody was going to have to rise to that.

But again, doing this at the PAC-12 level, it was a challenge. That's why I left Northern Colorado to do it at this kind of level with these kind of athletes and these kinds of bodies. And the hard job, not the easiest thing in Pullman, but you get the right people and they're committed, look at us. Look at us now.

Q. Bella, Ula, can you talk about what Charlissee has, you've seen playing with her and what she means to your team both as a player and as a person and just how she's grown, because you played with her now a couple of seasons, just what she means to this team.

ULA MOTUGA: Well I said it, coming in, like I played in 1 A like division 1 A like when I was playing against like four-nothing girls that I just had catch it, shoot it. Really didn't have any post moves or any like experience of just or any IQ at all. But like just, but just like seeing, like seeing her when she came in as a freshman and how much work, like how much better she was. She kind of like pushes you to be better because you want to play with her and you want to help her like score and help her play defense. Because she's so good in every single spot, like every single aspect of the game. She just kinds of motivates you to get better. She stayed with me this summer and she was motivating me every single time in the summer when we work out. Terrible Tuesdays, I feel like not running or anything, she would be like, Just imagine how good it's going to be when you're shape running better than most of the bigs in the PAC-12. And I'm like, Okay. And so she really motivates you and she's a great person off the court. She's my sister. Everything she's been through and she, for her to keep, to come back and give everything she has, it just goes to show you like good things happen to good people and this is definitely for her nana and so proud of her and love her and I would do anything for her. That means getting up every single time and going to practice and not even feel like it, I have to do that. I love you Charlissee.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Where to start? No, I think when everyone talks about Charlissee, it's different because you guys know her basketball and she's amazing and we all know that. But off the court she's one of the coolest people ever. She just like, she's just different. I know there's girls out there in our league and even just across the country who may be really good at basketball and they're just like, that's it. They don't really care about their teammates so they're not really invested in other people. It's just me, me, me.

But with her, it's different. She's a relationship person. If she knows you're doing something and it's not right, she's going to tell you straight away. If she doesn't like something, she's going to tell you straight away. But I think

she knows how to have fun off the court. She knows how to switch on the serious basketball mode Charlissee and then off the court it's the goofy, won't stop singing, wants to make TikToks fun Charlissee. I think that's what she's really good at is balance. Who she is as a person is a testament to her parents and the way that they raised her, obviously to be a kind person before anything, and I'm going to start crying.

No, I think that's why, obviously, her going home is so important is because family comes first and obviously when she's over here and she might not have family, she does reach out to us, then she has good connection with everyone on our team and I think that's why she's valuable in any team.

Q. Bella, down the stretch you've really seemed to take your game to a new level. And also, when you guys played Colorado and Utah at home without Charlissee you guys were able to keep those games really close. What was it that kind of -- was there something that clicked for you down the stretch that you just decided that you were able to kind of take on this bigger role offensively and become more of a scorer? And then those two games how much did those two help you guys gain confidence for this tournament in particular, especially with the gauntlet that you had to face?

ULA MOTUGA: Well, with Charlissee not being there all of us had to be big in terms of defense, offense and just rise up to the challenge. Of course, we would love her to stay and be there for those games. But it just kind of, everybody just stepped it up in practice that we all had to just hold each other accountable. It was great for her being the biggest leader, but everyone stepped up. We also knew that we could do it. The fact that we kept it close those two games it showed you how much better everybody got and how much everybody stepped up. Especially for AT and some of the freshmen in the team.

I feel like in the first half or third quarter I was kind of like trying to like play with finesse and stuff and I let the bigs from UCLA, kind of like just Coach E says, that I'm always finesse and trying to take shots that she doesn't recognize. So I really had to, in the fourth quarter, I really had to step it up and actual rise up to the challenge because I knew we only had 10 minutes of this thing that if we really wanted to make it another first I had to just be physical. As much as I hate it, I had to be physical and go against them. Yeah, I had to be physical and just go against the bigs and finish my moves. Because I know I put the work in, so I just had to really trust the work, trust it and, yeah, we did it. Go Cougs.

Q. Since your mom is right here, what kind of advice did she give you today and what did she say after you won?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I think she knows better than to give me advice at this point probably. She says, Get ahead and stay ahead. That's one of her best ones that she says. She's just a, we call some people cry bags. I have a dog that's a cry bag. When I leave the room it cries. And she's a cry bag. She just is really proud and happy and I'm just thrilled that she was here with us. I love my team that just loves her so much and takes care of her. It is just, she's the best. She demanded a lot from us, but the poise and grace that she's always had is just the thing that stands out to me. And she's still doing it now. So if I could be a little bit like her, that's awesome. So it's awesome. It's a good day. It's a good day to have her here.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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