

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 7, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Arizona Wildcats

Coach Adia Barnes

Breya Cunningham

Helena Pueyo

Postgame Press Conference



USC - 65, Arizona - 62

ADIA BARNES: It was sad, obviously, for us. It's our last Pac-12 tournament game. That's the unfortunate thing because this is a great conference that just has a great tradition. So it's sad to see that, and a lot of great teams and coaches. But this was a great game. We battled.

I want to give credit to USC. This was a great game. We battled. I want to give credit to USC. They're a really good team that's going to do a lot of special things, especially for the next four years with JuJu Watkins. She's a handful.

She's hard to guard. They're a really good team. I want to wish them good luck in the tournament. Lindsay has done a good job.

But as far as our team, with seven, we battled. We've had seven and haven't had a lot of bodies to practice, but we go out and we fight. I told our players today we won every quarter but the first quarter. The first five minutes we got punched and that was the difference in the game. That's one of the reasons we lost; we won all the other three quarters.

We had a chance to win just like we had the last time against them. But we just came up too short. So I'm proud of us.

Q. Breya, we saw you really take it up a notch today. We've watched you grow over the season, but today you were going up for shots strong. You were in great position. You had your hands on different things. You even double faked it one time. What was it for today that you sort of knew you needed to step up like that? You didn't look like a freshman today.

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: I don't know. I guess it was just like the situation of the game. It's either you win or you go home. So I guess it was just that. And coming off of that loss, like, we should have won that second game we played against them. So kind of just that, I guess, resentment from that game carried over. And just wanted to do everything I can to help my team win.

Q. How did you assess what happened there at the backside of the third quarter after you got up four and they were able to take the lead with a 12-1 run?

ADIA BARNES: I think we were just reaching, a little undisciplined they were driving to the basket. A couple of offensive rebounds. I don't know, I have to look at film to know exactly what else happened, but I'm assuming that's what happened.

And honestly in the third quarter, for a chunk of time we struggled getting organized offensively. We had a couple of people in foul trouble so we played a little bit bigger to try to help us with rebounds. We were kind of a little bit stagnant on offense. So tried to have some adjustments to correct that.

But I think when we got tired, it kind of wore on us and they got easy shots. And they had easy drives because we were out of position. We were trapping on the on-balls in the middle of the floor and they started to hit the roll in that quarter. And they hadn't really done it because our traps were really effective earlier in the game. I think a little fatigue made us a little bit slower to things.

Q. Where do you guys get the reservoir of energy with seven players to play at the intensity level that you guys do?

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: I mean, we have no choice. We only have seven people. So, like, we can't -- there's no slowing down or hoping I can get a sub or anything. You have to push through it and find that second wind.

Q. You mentioned JuJu in your opening statement. The freshman -- earlier today we saw Donovan Hunter. You have a slew of freshmen as well. Could you talk



about the poise we're seeing with the freshmen throughout this conference?

ADIA BARNES: We have a great conference, and the only good thing about us not being in the Pac-12 anymore is I don't have to see JuJu many more times which is going to be great. But we do have good, talented freshmen and a lot of them.

I'll talk about ours. Breya and a lot of people forget about Montaya, she's a freshman that got hurt, out of Vegas. We have Breya, Jada and Skylar. They're three freshmen that are really good and they've gotten better throughout the season.

I think the fortunate thing for them is because we have seven, they're in the great opportunities for learning. Which has made us -- we lost some games because of lack of experience, but it's going to pay dividends because of all the experience they're getting like today.

We played four overtime games. These are things I can't simulate in practice that they're getting in real time against really good players.

Breya battled all night against Rayah Marshall. Breya is a pro. She's going to be a WNBA player and she will probably dunking in the pros. She battled against her and that says a lot. But it's teaching her a lot. It's teaching her what it's like, and it's making her better.

Jada has been going against Charisma Osborne and all these great point guards throughout the year. And Skylar too. Skylar's just gone like this. They've all improved so much. And the experience they're getting now is going to pay off later.

The example I always use is UCLA last year. They played Kiki and Londynn a lot. And now Kiki and Londynn play like juniors or seniors. That's what I'm hoping this group will do because they're the future. They're the foundation and they're the ones that we're building around. And we just add Montaya in that mix.

I'm excited to see what the future brings for them and we're going to add some really good pieces around them. I'm proud of their growth and their resilience. It's hard for freshmen to battle against Cameron Brink, all these phenomenal players and you're a freshman and you're learning. Breya has never left the key as a post player in high school. Post players, just when you're tall you sit in the paint.

We're asking her to trap. We're asking her to deny, asking her to guard perimeters because it's the college game.

And I think they've all stepped up and done a really good job.

Q. There was a point right in the game where you guys turned it over like four or five times and they stretched it back out to 12. For most of the game you were taking care of the ball. But at that point what was different about them or about you? Were you rushing? What was going on?

HELENA PUEYO: I think we didn't know how to do our press offense. I think we were just rock crushing and they were just making a good press so we didn't really know. But after like some minutes we just fixed it and it was better.

ADIA BARNES: And sometimes that's the down fall of having a limited bench because Esmery is usually our 4 in that situation and we were with two 5s. That makes it hard because we're playing someone out of position, and Jada was in a little bit of foul trouble so we needed another ball handler on the floor.

Things like that with the lack of depth hurt. The press did affect us. We're supposed to have somebody in the middle, and I can't have her in three different spots, even though I try to sometimes.

That was hard. You don't want to bounce pass. In those press situations we had some bounce passes there. But I'm putting Isis in a tough situation -- I wasn't mad, because I was putting her in a situation that's really hard in the middle of the press against pressure, so there was a couple of turnovers there.

So those things are just, some of them were young mistakes and some were lack of people in different positions. Like we played a lot of times we played bigger today. That puts Esmery at the 3, so we're not as good. That takes away a really good 4 rebounder for us.

So I'm trying to put these pieces together and trying to force them to fit but you gotta do what you gotta.

Q. You mentioned it briefly but just the way that this team has been able to continue to fight and share that resilience, especially over the past few weeks. What about that has impressed you the most? And facing JuJu Watkins three times now in a month, you guys did a really good job on her today for the most part but what stands out about her to you?

ADIA BARNES: First thing JuJu, she's just -- she's a really good player, like we all know. But I think what makes her special is she has good size. She's about six-foot,

probably 6'2" with that bun. And she's like dynamic. So she can handle the ball. She's an athlete. She does a really good job of creating space. She's improved her shooting from high school. Now she's able to hit the 3.

She's able to go downhill like at will. And because she's always in attack mode you've got to guard her. Really effective in transition and just kind of isolation. And it's hard.

So we tried to trap her. I thought we did a very good job the last two games. We held her to a season low today, and she was working her butt off.

But we knew she was going to score. It was just make her less efficient, make her work really hard to score. So I felt like the first couple of minutes we let her go off, though. I think besides that we did a really good job on her.

But I think that's what makes her special. You put a smaller guard she'll post you. You put a bigger play she'll pull you outside. She's really good. Thank God she's going to a different league.

And the next thing, what impresses me about this group is despite the changes in the roster, despite what's going on, they battled and they believed and they were bought in. Whatever I could say I could say, do this, do that. And they're going to do it and they're going to do their best and try it and ride for it. And they have heart.

They don't give up. We could have gave up. We got punched in the face the first five minutes. We could have gave up, it could have been a 30-point game. USC is 25 points better than them, and that didn't show in the score but they are. Position by position and depth and experience, they're better.

But there isn't a game that -- we haven't been in probably two games here that was at USC and at home at UCLA. Every other game we've been in. One of the top teams in the country we lost by a possession, because we have heart, we battle, we believe, and they just fight.

And we're the only team in the Pac-12 that starts three freshmen. So I think with that give them credit because they just do whatever they're told and they try and they believe, and I think they just have heart, and that's the kind of kids I want to coach.

It's been more rewarding this year to coach them and be just not as good or have as much depth than it is some of the better teams because the better teams sometimes people think they've arrived and our kids are just hungry and just like trying their hardest and playing their heart out

for 40 minutes -- Helena averages, she's number one in Pac-12 in minutes at 39 a game. She played 40 minutes multiple times.

Tonight she played, what did she play? I gave her a couple of breaks -- 39 minutes and 22 seconds. That's a break because usually it's 40.

Like, damn, I played her 40 minutes. I don't realize it sometimes. But that's with guarding their best player. She guarded JuJu for how many minutes, she played 34 minutes. She guarded her for 33. That's a lot. That says a lot. I am proud of them their fight, their will, just who they are.

Q. Given all the things you've just said, we know you believe that your team is a tournament team. Why should the selection committee put you guys in?

ADIA BARNES: Because we deserve to be there. I mean, I think we just showed everybody. I think we've showed the country. With the starting three freshmen and the way we played, how we battled, the position we've been in all these top teams. They're No. 5 in the country with the best freshman in the country. And we battled and we had chances to win the game. And this is their first time there.

So we have eight players and six have not been here. So I think that there's no doubt. And every single time we play against one of these teams they say -- I think there's no doubt we're in the tournament, if they choose -- I'm not the one voting, but I think we've proven that.

And we're in the best conference in the country. I would like to see our seventh-, eighth-place teams in our conference battle the ACCs or any other conference and we'll beat them. Cal's good. All our seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth games are good.

We'll beat the other conference teams. I always think it's the West Coast bias. They're not watching us at midnight. They're not writing about us. They're not talking about us and don't give us enough credit.

That's the unfortunate thing about the Pac-12. It's never gotten the love and flowers it deserves. And that's been the story because of our TV deals. The fortunate thing about us going to the Big 12, we'll get that we'll get more national exposure. I'll ask you guys, do you think we should be in the tournament? I agree.

Q. Brea, you've been a teammate of Helena's all season and you see what she does day in, day out. Over the last couple of weeks of the season, she's even upped her game even more. What's it like for you

to be a teammate of someone like Helena? Tonight, she scores, she gets six assists, six steals. She's in on everything and she's directing traffic. What have you seen from her, especially in these last few weeks?

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: I think as a freshman I think I couldn't play with a better point guard. Helena, like you said, she directs everything. I learn a lot from Helena. She's the most unselfish player I've played with. She's always playing for us rather than herself.

I don't know, I think everybody's just playing a little bit harder these last couple of games just because of the stakes, we've got to win a couple more games to get considered for the tournament. And this tournament, it's win or go home, things like that.

I don't know what we're going to do when Helena leaves next year. We've got to fill that gap. But other than that, I love Helena.

ADIA BARNES: Last things, congratulations to Helena broke the all-time steals record. Arizona. Really, really proud of her. (Indiscernible) is not going to be mad at you. Don't worry. Thanks everyone.

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