

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Washington State Cougars

Kamie Ethridge

Bella Murekatete

Charlisse Leger-Walker



Q. We're going to ask about this year's team and everything that you've got building, but now that you've had some time to reflect back on what that run in Vegas and winning the Pac-12 tournament, what it did for your players, for your program, for you guys, what did it mean and how can it help propel you into the future?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I'm not sure I can even answer that very well still. You know, I think it just validates you. I think our team, taking over a program that had never really won, the whole university hadn't won a Pac-12 championship as far as on the women's side, it's a statement. It's get the right people in place, and anything can happen.

Clearly our team just got on a roll and did -- I just keep saying, it was magical, and just one step after another, and played really well. Played probably as good as we could play and got -- were led by some really strong, strong players, Charlisse had an amazing tournament, and now I think it validates us in recruiting, validates us as a program that, again, I don't know that we have the biggest budget of anyone in the league. We don't have the shiniest, sexiest stuff, but that doesn't come into factor when you step on the court and play.

Our kids played better than anyone else, and we won a championship.

Q. What's it like to accomplish something that your entire university just is so excited about, your community, your town, your whole section of your state just embraces you, the people you heard from, what did that all feel like afterwards?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, if you know Cougs, you understand that question. It's just a family. You feel it. You feel the support. You feel the love, the support in

every single way. People reached out. We go all over the world recruiting, and we still say Cougs and people know about that championship run and what our program has been doing.

Just love Pullman, love the community, love that area of the country because they support the Cougs so well and embrace our program and our players, and now we just need to see if we can run it back a little bit.

Q. Had an opportunity to spend some time with you up in Pullman earlier this spring, and we had a chat, a roundtable about women's basketball and how it's growing, particularly in Pullman. Season ticket sales are at a record pace. What is the driving force behind that?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, winning. I think everybody knows that, in women's basketball, I think in athletics in general, you have to win to really get people in the stands. Other programs in the university have succeeded. Volleyball is killing it and selling out Bohler Gym.

So it was time for us. I think getting a better crowd got stymied a little bit with COVID. When we finally got good, no one wanted to come back to the gym.

I think this is crucial for us. We're coming off winning a championship, and obviously have a great team coming back, and I think the expectation is high, and I think people wanting to be and wanting to watch this and wanting to be on board is really big.

We need more people in our stands. We need to make that a home court environment where people can't walk out of there with a win.

Q. What are the two or three things that'll be most different about this team from last year's team?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Good question. I don't know different. I think just, again, every year I've come up here and we've talked about, we're still young, we're still young. We won last year and we're young. We have everybody back, but we're old now. We really are pretty experienced, and they



literally are kind of seniors in their last run at it.

So I just think seasoned, and I don't think anything should really surprise us. I think we have got that experience in our senior class, and then I think we have some really, really impressive freshmen behind them.

I think more than anything, this team needs to be different in the sense that we need to have five and six people in double-digit scoring. We cannot rely on and just depend on Charlisse carrying us completely or Bella, those two in particular. We really need the best teams across the country really get four, five, six people in double figures, and I think we have the players and the talent in the gym to be able to do that this year.

Q. Who are the two or three players that we should keep an eye on on your roster that are going to provide that extra scoring?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Jenna Villa from Arlington, Washington, over on the west side, she led us in scoring by far, has the ability to really shoot the ball. She's someone that we really need to step in and keep people honest, keep us one-on-one in the post and make people have to extend out on us.

Eleanora Villa, another Villa, not twins, she's actually from -- we call her Ellie, from Italy, really, really, really (audio interruption).

Obviously I think the depth in our team. Everybody that's healthy right now is really going to help us. I think we can go nine or ten deep and we're really solid across the board.

Beyond the seniors that are well in place and that you know about, I think our freshmen are going to step up and have great careers for us.

Q. You mentioned the foreign tour and you were doing a lot of traveling this summer. You coached the Team USA Americup team and had a lot of Pac-12 players from different teams that you got to coach, and Chance Gray was sitting up here on that seat earlier today and saying that she loved being able to be coached by you and learn from you. What was that experience like and dynamic of being able to coach some of the players that you have to go against during the season?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I think in all honesty, she really wants to poke my eyes out. (Laughter.)

You know, USA Basketball is an amazing thing, and anytime you get called to do that, you want to help and you want to do your best.

I have so much respect for the players that showed up and trained and went into that environment. Again, we took a team that we didn't have to qualify, we didn't have to do anything, so everybody else there was trying to qualify for the Olympics, so we were really faced with that older experienced team that we were going against.

I thought the team really responded, and it's so hard. Nine, ten practices, try to get everybody on the same page and take -- represent and kind of take on the roles that they're given, that's a really hard place for great, great players and best players on their teams to do.

So much respect for every one of those players that put on that jersey for us, and really proud of the silver. I know that's not supposed to happen in USA Basketball, but really thought the team responded well, and bringing home that silver was a big thing for us.

Q. Seven of your nine years that you've been a head coach you've coached a Leger-Walker. Started with Krystal and Charlisse now. What's it going to like when you don't have a Leger-Walker?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, there's one more back there.

Q. We won't talk about that --

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: I don't think we can.

Q. But being part of that family almost at this point for as much as you've been involved in their lives, what is a Leger-Walker?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Oh, gosh. I love talking about Charlisse. They asked a question about before, were any senior nights more special, and Krystal having come from, followed us and did that whole thing, and you experience the whole Leger-Walker and you have so much affection and trust buildup.

But I just feel like we're a part of their tribe. That's what I think of them. I think they're a tribe and you have to earn your spot. You don't just get to be a part of their tribe unless you earn it and are loyal and are trustworthy.

I think we've been through it a lot, and obviously really proud of who she is and that entire family. They were born to be superstars and leaders and great human beings, and that's a credit to Eliu and that fantastic mother, Leanne.

Q. Let's talk about that other very special player that you brought with you to Las Vegas, Bella Murekatete. The personality is as big as the play on the court. When you think about her story and her growth and

what she's done and what you expect from her this year, what comes up?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, just continued. Again, we talked a lot about it, like Bella has come so far, transformation in all parts of her life. Academics, she's leaving with a couple of degrees. But what she's done on the court, her work ethic, her discipline, her sticking to structure and her improvement, it happens. It happens when you commit to it, and she is so committed to being a great player. She wants to play professionally.

I think she has a great -- her ceiling is still really, really high, so she's got a long way to go, and it's really exciting to continue to coach her, and we need big things from her. We're counting on her to be great this year.

Q. I was just in Pullman a few weeks ago, and look who I ran into out to dinner. Tell me what -- we were talking about how excited the community was and the support and excitement around what you guys were able to do, that historic win here. How has it changed? Does it feel different around the program coming into this season, or is it kind of like that's last year and we're ready for this year?

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, it feels good. It feels good. Of course you cannot forget what we did in Vegas because that's incredible.

But I think it's time for us to just kind of like put that in the back and start a new season and focus on going back to back.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I think I would say it's a little bit of both. You have to look back on the season and reflect on why were we so successful, why did we manage to win, and you have to take those things and put it into a new perspective this year because obviously our team is different, and the vibe is different.

You come in -- maybe our first couple of years, we were always the underdog. In some senses we still are.

I think the feel and the vibe of the program now is we've proven ourselves. We've proven how good we can be, and we want to keep that going. We want to build from what we had last year.

So definitely have to take those reflections from last year and just build on that going forward.

Q. When you think about winning four games in five days, and towards the end the preparation was put your feet up and get some ice because you couldn't

even walk around because you guys were so tired. Does it make you feel like you can achieve anything, not just in basketball but in life, if you can in five days do that?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, that's really hard. When you put it into words like that and actually think about how difficult that is, not just physically but mentally, as well, it gives you such a feeling of accomplishment and just -- I think just the vibe and the energy that we had within our team. Looking back and seeing like, yeah, we did that, and we all were there for that and we all felt every single emotion going through that. That is a good feeling to know we can do something like that and come out on top of it for the better.

I think just as student-athletes in general, I mean, I don't think we take a lot of time enough to reflect and actually look back at everything that we have achieved, and so I think we have days like this to highlight those things, it's really important and really special just to talk about that.

Q. Charlisse, you talk about the standards that were set and what you all achieved in becoming the first 7 seed to get to the final, but you personally had quite an emotional season. You left for New Zealand twice, and on championship night you said, Nana was with you. What do you take from that, and what did you learn from that in terms of your passion, your soul, your heart, just everything, and that you can bring into this season with you, knowing what you overcame to help lead Washington State to the title?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, last season was definitely an emotional roller coaster. Going through that period was obviously very difficult.

But for me, I think one of the biggest things that I take away from that is how much support and love that I have not just from my family but my family at WSU, and the support that they had for me was like no other. I couldn't have come back and bounced back and played those games if I didn't have Coach here and her staff and all my teammates 100 percent there supporting me the whole time.

I think coming back and having to play -- not having to play, getting to play basketball and kind of almost having that as an outlet and kind of going back to why I started playing basketball was for my family and because I loved the game and it was something that I loved to do with my sister and watched my mom play and my Nana would come and watch me play these games.

I think coming back and going through that tournament with



so many different emotions going on, not just having the basketball highs and then also in the downtime when you're by yourself and you start thinking about whatever you want to think about, you really do have to lean on your support systems.

I think I really took -- one of the biggest things I took away was how important to me that really is, and I think that basketball kind of emphasized that for me in that period of that Pac-12 tournament week.

Q. The two of you as a tandem stayed in Pullman last summer, stayed together, worked out together. I assume that happened again this past summer, correct? To you, Bella, since the evolution of your game has been very impressive over the last few years, what's different about Bella Murekatete going into her final season at WSU?

BELLA MUREKATETE: What changed is I think I'm more consistent with my outside shot right now. I think I'm a bit faster, just you can tell my body changed a lot. I'm a bit more explosive, and I think decision making, and knowing that I'm a leader actually and having people leaning on me and telling people and also showing people how to lead and stuff, I guess me -- having Charlissee in my corner teaching me how to lead and all that, and being more explosive and knowing when to score and when to pass, all that, I think just decision making and outside shot. All that stuff.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Everything.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Everything. Got to Get better on everything.

Q. Your coach was up her telling us that your ceiling is -- you've got more to go and you've been working really hard. I read you said that Kamie has been like a mom to you. Just reflect on that relationship and how it's developed and what she means to you.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, Kamie means a lot. She's the best coach I could ever ask for to coach me in college because she cares about me off the court and on the court, and she makes sure that I'm always in a place that I need to be.

She just wants to see me succeed just in life, and she wants to see a successful Bella, and that takes a lot.

No one else will ever want to see that except a mother for their child, and that's how I think of Kamie and my relationship is.

Q. For both of you, just coming off the Pac-12 tournament run and knowing how many good teams are going to be in the conference this season, that it's going to look different after this season, how excited are you to get back into the fold and to play some really tough teams and great competitors?

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, very excited. Excited to play all these big teams.

But just excited to see what we can accomplish with this group we have for the final year for both of us, at least for me, and yeah, just having fun with it and trying to sing more Shania Twains hopefully. It's different now. We're not singing that song no more. Right, Charlissee?

Q. Oh, you're not going to sing it anymore?

BELLA MUREKATETE: Oh, it's exclusive. So you're not supposed to --

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: We've got a surprise.

Q. Is it a different Shania song?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: You'll have to see, I guess.

Q. How long are we going to have to wait?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: At least until the first game.

BELLA MUREKATETE: It's special maybe.

Q. Charlissee, how about you off-season, what have you been working on to take your game to the next level, and do your mom and sister get involved in this is what I think you need to do?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, sometimes they do. Actually so during the summer I went home and I played for my national team a lot, and a big part of that was to work on my decision making and what better way to do that than at an international level, and my national team a play a lot of the point guard role, point guard, 2 guard, so making decisions in real time has been something that I've been focusing on a lot.

I think obviously consistency with how I score and in what way at every different level, whether that's at the rim, mid-range or pulling up. Three-point consistency is a big point of emphasis for me.

I think that overall for me this off-season has been really

important, and my mom is an assistant coach in that team, and my sister also plays on that team, so a lot of real-time feedback right there, and obviously get the feedback from Coach.

Q. Bella, you're entering your fifth year and also majoring in sports management; have you looked at what's next? Of course you want to play great basketball your last year, but with you majoring in sports management, have you given any thought to what you want to do, whether it's basketball, coaching, anything like that?

BELLA MUREKATETE: No, I have not thought about that, but I definitely would like to be involved with basketball somehow, so if that means being an announcer or coaching, any of that, but I'm just really trying to stay connected to basketball somehow.

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