

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Ole Miss vs Notre Dame

Sunday, March 24, 2024

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

Ole Miss Rebels

Yolett McPhee-McCuin

Kennedy Todd-Williams

Ayanna Thompson

Media Conference

Q. Ayanna, what do you tell yourself to stay ready? Obviously you played a lot more yesterday than you have recently. What's that like mentally?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Honestly for me it's just being ready for my teammates. I know what this means, and I just want to keep going. I want to see the team keep going, so just be ready for my teammates.

Q. Obviously Hannah and Sonia are two of Notre Dame's best players. When they're working in tandem, how hard are they to guard? And if you'd want to speak about Hidalgo and the season she's had as an All-American, as well?

KENNEDY TODD-WILLIAMS: It's the whole team. I think for us it's just about sticking to our principles. We know they're hard to guard, especially those two, but just being ready, staying in front of them, and really sticking to our principles is going to be the keys. We know that. Hidalgo is a scrappy player, but it's about us at this point.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Piggy-backing off that, just understanding personnel, knowing not to play with the ball in front of Hidalgo, and knowing that Sonia is looking to score.

Q. Kennedy, can you talk about how some of the environments you played at in the SEC can prepare you for playing in a second round game on an opponent's home court?



KENNEDY TODD-WILLIAMS: Yeah, playing on a second round opponent's court, they're going to bring their fans, so we're just going to be prepared for that. We know they're going to have a crowd, so it's about staying to who we are and just not letting the environment affect us. We have time on the court today, so we're just going to be getting ourselves familiar with the court.

Q. Have you had a chance to look over the film from last night yet, and how did you feel about that performance on second looking? Was it what you were hoping for?

AYANNA THOMPSON: I feel like after looking at the film, we've really looked at our transition defense. We know Notre Dame likes to score in transition, so we've been working on and talking about what we need to do to fix what we did yesterday.

Q. Kennedy, you've played in the ACC, now you're in the SEC. Are there any noticeable differences or similarities between the competition in both the conferences and the style of play?

KENNEDY TODD-WILLIAMS: Absolutely. It's about the physicality. The physicality was super different, and I think it's kind of helped me prepare going in, especially playing against an ACC team. There's so many differences and similarities, of course, but it's really just about the tougher team, and I'm excited to play an ACC team that I'm familiar with.

It's just about being a dog out there and just being the tougher team.

Q. Kennedy, can you talk about what made you choose to come to Ole Miss and transfer and play for Coach Yo?

KENNEDY TODD-WILLIAMS: Yeah, I really want to go to the next level, and my vision and myself and this program align with Coach Yo, and I just really wanted to get better and go further than we did last year, so it was a growth effort for me to just be better than what I was before and just the commitment that I had to this team and to the

coaches and stuff, I just really wanted to be better for the team.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about is this going to be a game of attrition? Do you try to wear Notre Dame down? What's the plan that would help you guys be successful?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Curt wants the game plan. We're definitely at Notre Dame, aren't we. Did you ask Niele for the game plan? I'm just kidding.

We try to wear everybody down, no matter what. That is our style of play. 94 feet, like I said yesterday, it seemed like Marquette was in charge of the pace, but really they weren't because that's not how they play.

So what we try to do is make teams adjust to how we play, which is up and down, fast, and really make you have to work for every single bucket that you get. I think naturally it wears teams down.

We've played some really elite-level three-point shooting teams, and as you could see last night, they just didn't have the legs when they really needed it, and that is because of the work we put in the first 30 minutes of the game.

Q. Y'all obviously beat a No. 1 seed last year. This is a No. 2, same kind of deal, though, playing on their home floor. How much does that experience help you guys, and just looking at Notre Dame, does it feel like they're one of those top-level teams and it would mean a lot to beat them?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, first of all, anytime you get to win another game, it's a big deal. I think the committee has done a great job with getting the best teams in the field, and so the fact that we're one of the 32 remaining, it means something.

As far as the experience, hopefully it does work out for us, but as you can see, we rely on a bunch of different players throughout the course of the game. I don't think our depth is talked about a lot because maybe all their numbers don't show up in the box score, but anytime that you can have people play minutes and it not hurt you, that is depth.

I don't care if the score is the same when they got in to when they left. The fact that they weren't in the negative is key.

Notre Dame is a very good team. I think the Southeastern Conference has prepared us for that, just play high-level teams with big-time players. You talk about star-studded

freshmen, last year we had Flau'jae and this year it's McKayla Williams and MiLaysia Fulwiley. We have a good bit of star power in our conference, so I don't know that our team will be emotional any way good or bad. We just want to win.

Q. When you talk about the star-studded freshmen, you're alluding to Hannah Hidalgo. How good is she and what kind of threat does she pose to y'all?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, I guess we're going to find out tomorrow because sometimes TV lies to you. I'm excited to see her in person. I haven't had a chance to watch her in person, obviously, because we're not in the same conference.

A lot of times they play when they play, so this is the most film I've really been able to watch on her just because we really had no reason to do so before.

But I do know that she's a dog, and she's deserving of everything that she's gotten. I don't think they would be where they are without her.

Q. In general, and I know it varies from venue to venue, but how big would you say the home-court advantage is for NCAA Tournament teams, and secondly, were you surprised or disappointed at all to what extent it cleared out for the second game yesterday?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Oh, look, it could be one person in the -- it could be nobody. I don't care. When the ball tips up, it's about my team versus the other team. Obviously there are such things as home-court advantage.

But again, when you look at our record, we were 12-4 so we didn't win all our games at home. We have played some big-time teams on the road, and we've played in front of big-time crowds.

At our home we played LSU, we had 9,000 people. We go on the road, South Carolina is sold out with 18,000 people.

We've played big crowds throughout our whole conference play and have had to win meaningful games on the road. When we beat Alabama, that was a big win, Vanderbilt on the road. Then we've played neutral sites, and then obviously we've played in Palo Alto last year.

As far as we're concerned, we have the philosophy we're all we've got, we're all we need. We just kind of hone our own energy no matter what, and I kind of took that from South Carolina like that's something that they say and they've got 18,000 fans, and they're still like, we're all we've

got, we're all we need, and I thought that was powerful because at the end of the day it really matters who you're in the foxhole with every day.

I'd be surprised if we were to get rattled. I'm more concerned about home-court advantage when it comes to officiating, if I'm being completely transparent, just because sometimes officials are human, and some of these crowds are brutal. Sometimes I am like, did you make that call for the fans or did you -- you know what I mean? They're just caught up. They get emotional.

But I have trust that we're going to have the best officials in the country tomorrow, and I'm leaning on that. That shouldn't even be a factor. I just expect it to be a great game.

Q. What's your process been like preparing on a short turnaround? What were the last 12 hours like, and what's the rest of today going to be like for your staff and your team?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, this is definitely more refreshing than in the SEC tournament or when we were in the Bahamas because you have no time. You play and then you rest and you play the next day.

When we were in the Bahamas and we won the tournament, we didn't even walk through anything. That's why we're built for the tournament, because our system is our system. We don't have to change it. We make a few tweaks, and that's about it.

We honestly feel like this is a gift because we get a day where we can watch film and truly prepare for a great staff and a great team in Notre Dame.

Last night I think we were up, coaches, until about midnight, and then we watched film this morning at 11:00 for about an hour, and now we're here.

As far as we're concerned, we treat it almost like a conference prep, even though we get two days. This is more than enough time for us to prepare.

Q. You talked about watching film. When you watch film, what do you see in Maddy Westbeld who's not your typical 4 and the challenges of defending her?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah. Man, she is a special player. To me, she's their secret sauce. She does a lot of different things that, like you said, we hadn't seen a 4 player have to do. She can be a matchup problem, so we have to think about how they're going to try to use her for their advantage, because I think it's all about advantage

basketball. At least it is for us.

But great coaches, and I think Niele is one, so they're going to look for advantages. It's no secret people see us switch ball screens, so how they're going to try to take advantage of that and what are we going to do to counter what they try to do as far as taking advantage of that.

Last night Marquette did the same thing, and they got us a couple times, but then we made some adjustments and we were successful, too.

Listen, I know they've got six, seven players, but they just won a conference championship, and I've got 12 and we didn't. We're not going to make this as if they're the underdogs. They're the 2 seed, we're the 7 seed. As far as we're concerned, they have the pressure, we don't.

Q. I wanted to get your thoughts on it's been a season where it feels like -- and there's numbers to back this up, women's basketball profile has taken a huge leap. Why do you think this is the time that that's happening, and what do you think is driving it?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, I think definitely social media has been great. I feel like the media has done a great job in accepting the fact that women's basketball has star power. NIL is big, too.

All of these companies that are utilizing these student-athletes for their name, image and likeness has truly upped the brand.

Back in the day when you think about star power, I was a part of the original Big East. I was at Pitt when we were all in there, Notre Dame, St. John's, West Virginia. Remember that? I know you look young, but back then, it was Skylar and then there was UConn. Those were the stars, and then everybody else.

But now in every region you have a star, east, west, north, south, midwest, you have stars, and that's what makes it cool, and they're not afraid to not promote themselves and their brand.

That's women. Look, I've been married 16 years. We're a little smarter than men, right? We know how to utilize our brand. They've just done a great job of it. People have caught on. There are a lot of girl dads out there, so now it isn't embarrassing anymore. Women's basketball is here, and I expect just an upward trajectory as we continue to grow our game.

Q. Notre Dame hit six of its first eight threes yesterday. Can you talk about the challenge of

defending the perimeter but not allowing Hidalgo to create the way she does?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, our philosophy is dictate and disrupt, but even more in depth, let's take away -- let's go a little deeper into layers. It's us against the ball.

When we play, when we defend, it's not whomever we decide to guard Hidalgo. It's not that person against Hannah. It's us against Hannah. So that's our philosophy.

When we put a lot of stops together, no one takes the credit because someone took away the vision for the pass so they couldn't make a perfect pass. Someone got their hand on the line. Someone shrunk the floor. That is our system.

We don't ever look at a matchup like oh, it's going to be like Hannah versus Kennedy Todd-Williams. No, it's Hannah versus team 49 and our defense. That's what's worked for us.

Q. There's been a lot of talk on X, formerly Twitter, of your husband and daughters. What does their support mean to you?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Oh, man. I couldn't be who I am without my husband. Like he is the biggest critic, cheerleader, coach in the house. Make no mistake. During conference play, my dad and mom, they come and they stay with us, and my dad is 78 and he's a Hall-of-Fame coach and whatnot.

When I walk into the house, they're in another room breaking down the next opponent. Now they've got my mom doing it. So my mom is like, well, I'm watching film.

So this is a basketball family, and I think we broke through to our six year old yesterday because we were leaving the hotel room, and Yuri said, mommy -- I said, Yuri, where's your tablet. She said, I'm not taking my tablet, I'm going to watch the game. I gave her a high five and she had so much pride.

When I saw the picture, I didn't even recognize her. I just saw Kelly. Then of course the internet does what it does, and then they show Yuri, and she's like pissed off at the call. It was like highlight -- that is perfect.

Consider us a basketball/soccer/gymnastics family.

Q. Did Kelly go to the Coach Yo school of working refs or is that his natural --

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: No, let me tell you

something. You know how I say my tweets are my own? Whatever he does is his. There's no influence by me. I told you he's the coach in the house. Like he tells me -- sometimes I have to say, Kelly, you're not at practice every day. Like I'm at practice. All of the SEC officials know him, and he knows them by first name.

I didn't know this, but some of our fans said that -- I don't sit during the game, so they said, do you know that your husband doesn't sit during the game? So if I pace, he paces. If I stand, he stands. He is fully committed, and I love that.

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