

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Middle Tennessee vs Louisville

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

Middle Tennessee Lady Raiders

Savannah Wheeler

Courtney Whitson

Rick Insell

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome back to Baton Rouge. It's time to talk with Middle Tennessee.

They won the regular season Conference USA, also the Conference USA Tournament. To my left, we have Courtney Whitson, who was named to the All Conference USA team. And to my immediate left is Savannah Wheeler, All CUSA as well as the Conference USA Player of the Year.

With that, we'll open up the floor for questions for Savannah or for Courtney.

Q. Savannah, you always give up some size often when you're guarding particularly bigger guards like Louisville has. What's the strategy for making sure that you say -- you keep your assignment up when you're maybe going to have some size on the perimeter?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: My size is obviously very limited, but just do whatever I can to contain the ball and just seeing where the ball is at, just keeping within my defensive principles. One pass away, deny. Two pass away, help. Really just playing within myself and containing what's in front of me.

Q. You guys had a couple of slow starts in a couple of games in the conference tournament last week. What do you have to do to make sure you don't start slow tomorrow?



COURTNEY WHITSON: Just our mindset, making sure -- people see that as a negative. We see that as a positive because we haven't put a complete game together yet. So we're looking for that complete game to be tomorrow.

So we're excited. We know that we have all the right pieces, and it's just making sure -- we practice every single day to start good in our drills. So our practice will pay off eventually.

Q. Courtney, you obviously got the better of Louisville last year. This is a team that feels like they've improved a lot, as they said this morning. As you get ready and watch film for the game, where do you think they've improved this season? What are they doing really well at the moment?

COURTNEY WHITSON: We have a lot of respect for their program. They're going to be very physical with us, we know that. We know they're going to give us their best shot, and we're going to give them our best shot. So we know it's going to be a great game.

We're not overlooking anybody. We're all here in the NCAA Tournament for a reason. So we make sure that we're sticking to who we are regardless of the other team who's in front of us.

Q. Courtney, I'll follow up with you since you just said you're still trying to play your perfect game. You swept through Conference USA completely. You don't have a loss in the calendar year. If you haven't played your perfect game, how do you describe the way you all played through conference? Your first game was Louisiana Tech, it was overtime, and after that you hit a confident streak. Can you describe it?

COURTNEY WHITSON: I think Middle Tennessee basketball is all about -- people are like, wow, your coaches are really tough on you. It's for a reason. We have expectations that exceed other program's expectations, which allows us to do things like go perfect in the conference. We're not done yet. We're not satisfied.

I think it's just the part of never being satisfied or

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comfortable. We know that we have all the talent we need on the court. We just need everybody clicking at the same time. So offensively, defensively, once we feel that spark that we've hit our peak, we'll be good to go, but we just don't feel we've gotten there yet.

Q. Savannah, how have you been able to stay so focused with the fact that your last lost game was in December, being able to lock in and continue with the success you've had so far?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: Every day is preparation. The coaches did a great job with scouting, and our practice coaches do a good job of giving us a clean look of what the teams are going to give us.

Mainly it's just staying within the moment and just keeping good preparation throughout every practice.

THE MODERATOR: Can you share with us what it was like when you watched the announcements when you saw the draw, where you saw you were coming to Baton Rouge, but just the focus on now starting -- you had your conference season, you had your conference tournament, now the second season with NCAA. Can you tell us about what you saw with the seeding and what the focus has been like over the last week?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: Definitely just a great feeling. We made it to the NCAA Tournament last year and got beat the first round. That's last year. We know we played Louisville, and that's last year. That's just going with the same thing and keeping with the same preparation and just continue to play Middle Tennessee basketball and just continue being our best.

THE MODERATOR: Courtney, you're a graduate, right?

COURTNEY WHITSON: Yes, sir.

THE MODERATOR: Both of you are.

Just from a personal point of view, what the journey means for -- I'm sorry. It will be the last go around for all the experiences you've had, and now to have one last shot, what it means to you personally.

COURTNEY WHITSON: What a blessed journey it's been. I can't say enough words about it. Just like our Coach said in practice the other day, we've had all these chapters in our book that's been written so far, and this is our last chapter. Why not end our story the best way it can be written.

We're excited. We're blessed. We're just keeping that

same focus as grad students, as leaders of our team. It's in our hands basically. The ball is in our court. We've just got to go out and meet that challenge.

SAVANNAH WHEELER: It's just been an unbelievable experience, coming here, coming from a different school. I've met a lot of great people here. We have a great fan base, great teammates, great coaches. It's been a great two years.

We just want to continue getting better, continue improving, and just staying locked in and continue staying within our preparation.

Q. Savannah, so at the Huntsville tournament, you had a great fan base come out. What are you hoping for tomorrow with your fan base coming out? What do you have to say to your fans?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: Just continue being loud. The tournament, the conference tournament, our fan base, they played a role within our success. Really throughout the entire season, our fans have played a role in our success.

Starting from the Tennessee game, we played them at Huntsville, and just keep on going. They played a huge role within our success, so just continue being loud and cheer on for the Blue Raiders.

Q. Courtney, so much focus for this team is on the starting five because you all play so many minutes. You wouldn't have won that Conference USA tournament last week without key minutes off the bench for multiple players. How are you getting them ready for what might be their first extended minutes time in this tournament this week?

COURTNEY WHITSON: That's a really hard position to be in because you don't know if you're going to go out there and get the most minutes you've had or the least minutes you've had. Our girls off the bench did so amazing for us in the conference tournament because they were able to step up when their number was called. That comes not just overnight. That comes with the work they started in the summer.

I think they're ready for that, just having that same mindset, especially for the younger girls who this is their first time being in the NCAA Tournament, just making sure they have a level mind and knowing their work that's gotten them to this point can't stop now. Just that same approach, and they'll be fine.

Q. Just with both programs, Tennessee and Kentucky are right near each other, so there's probably a lot of



overlap among the fan bases or the connections between the two schools. Just wondering if there was anything interesting that you knew about in that light of you're playing a team from the same region, probably a lot of people, maybe a lot of high school girls watching both teams might have a choice between the two and things like that?

COURTNEY WHITSON: That's obviously a very good point. I don't think anybody does it like our fan base does it. I think we're very fortunate to have our tournament in Huntsville. Whenever we saw that we're playing a team like Louisville, we knew that we would both travel well. We played them in the past and had great fan turnout.

We're looking forward to the excitement, the atmosphere. That's something you grow up as a little girl dreaming to play in.

THE MODERATOR: Savannah, Courtney, it's a pleasure to meet you..

We welcome you back to Baton Rouge, now joined by head coach Rick Insell, his 19th season at Tennessee. They won the Conference USA regular season, Conference USA Tournament, and the team is making its 12th NCAA Tournament appearance under Coach Insell.

We'll open the floor up for you for an opening comment.

RICK INSELL: We're pretty excited about being here. We were in the tournament last year. We got basically most of the team back. We've kind of been on a run, and we're kind of excited about where our basketball team is at right now. I look for it to be a great game tomorrow.

Q. I think last year Cochran might have been one of the only players from that team that you all remember. So many different players they got from the portal, Jefferson, you name it. I guess what's different about this year's Louisville team in terms of getting prepared for them?

RICK INSELL: Probably last year's team is more experienced together, playing together. Chemistry was probably better. But now this year's team, they're just a totally different type team. They're stronger. They're more physical. They rebound the heck out of the basketball. They push the ball.

Last year's team was, they could do the same thing, but I don't think they were as physical in the lane as they are right now. That sometimes will present a problem.

Q. I know you're playing two different teams, but with

the way last year's first round game ended, preparing for this tournament, have you changed anything about the way you guys have prepared?

RICK INSELL: Absolutely. Last year Colorado came in. They were aggressive. They got up the line. They kind of bullied you. We knew from the very beginning this year that we were going to have to get tougher on the perimeter with our guards. We knew we were going to have to get more physical inside.

So that's really what we've been working on from last April to right now is we knew again we'd have a great chance to be in the tournament, and we knew how some of the teams wanted to play us. So every day our trainer's been working on that, and then every day in practice -- you've been in some of the practices. You've seen what we've been talking about, being aggressive on the perimeter and also inside. Yes, we've been preparing.

Q. When you're preparing for the postseason, you obviously have to throw in extra scenarios, end of clock and other stuff, to get prepared for in these in-game situations. How much do you do early in the season versus adding it to your practice, breaking the press and stuff like that, as it gets closer to postseason play?

RICK INSELL: From our very first practice, we talk about going to the NCAA Tournament. This is not something you do a week before, two weeks before, a month out. From our very first practices, we're talking about the NCAA Tournament.

From our very first game, we know that we're preparing ourselves to get an at-large bid because we know, if something was to happen, someone go down with an ankle, a knee, a shoulder, whatever, you want to still have a chance to get into the tournament.

We did that. Even if we'd have gotten beat in the tournament, we felt like we had an at-large bid. We'd done enough for the committee. We start that the very first game.

If you look at our schedule, Princeton, they're in the tournament right now, one of the top teams in the tournament. What are they, 8th seed or 9th seed? That's who our first game was with.

You go back, you got DePaul, you got Michigan, you got Memphis twice, you got Tennessee. So it's not like that you got to play that type of competition for you to get an at-large bid. We know that. You look at our NET ranking, we were 38. I don't know what we are this morning. That



would have put us in the tournament. So that's what we're all about.

Preparing from that first game to get in, not -- you see a lot of teams that will play that pansy schedule to get wins. We know we're going to get wins, but everybody that we play on our schedule has got a chance to beat us. I think that helps us as far as being mentally tough also.

Q. With the transfer rules having changed, what goes into player retention nowadays? How much has that changed for you? How do you feel about that?

RICK INSELL: We've been very fortunate the last couple of years because we haven't lost anybody. We lost one young lady to the transfer portal last year, but that's kind of been it.

But we know that's part of our world right now. That's where we've got to live in, and we've got to adapt to that. I'm very fortunate that I've got -- I'm an old guy. I'm very fortunate that I've got four young coaches that are very much in step with what's going on in the basketball world. That's kind of the nucleus of our program if you want to know the fact.

Q. At the conference tournament in Huntsville, the teams seemed to start slow in multiple games. What can we expect tomorrow starting out?

RICK INSELL: I'm kind of going to answer that in two ways. One, we were playing in an icebox. So when you're cold, it takes a little time to warm up, but what an environment Huntsville was. I mean, it was just a great, great environment for us, for our fan base. The hospitality was unreal.

So even though it got a little cold, maybe that was a negative there, everything else was a positive. 95 percent, 90 percent was a positive. That 10 percent was it was a little cold.

And I attribute that to kind of the way we started, to be honest with you. I'd like to start out hitting every shot and going through the third quarter. We'd be in pretty good shape there. But I'm proud of our basketball team that, even though we got down and we started slow, we were able to play great defense, and we were able to carry it on until we got ourself warmed up, and we moved it on out. So very proud of our young ladies.

Q. You mentioned your fans. How do they really change your atmosphere in how the girls play? They changed the atmosphere a little bit at Huntsville once the fans got a little bit rowdy. How do you expect that

to change tomorrow with a little bit of a longer haul down here?

RICK INSELL: I think most of the LSU fans will be for us. They say they've got 17,000. We welcome them all.

(Laughter).

Our fans are a little different than a lot of people. They're very much invested in what's going on at Middle Tennessee State. They're very much invested in our women's basketball program. And our team is very much invested in our fans.

As a matter of fact, we've got some fans sitting down there with our team right now in the holding place. So we'll have as many as we can get here and most of our parents. We may be small, but we'll be loud.

Q. Going back to the scheduling you were talking about, you've long been an advocate for scheduling tough in the conference schedule. How do you go about getting other teams in Conference USA to schedule as tough as you have early on and holding them to that standard?

RICK INSELL: You're not going to have that. You can talk until you're blue in the face. I've been asking that question, and so has our administration, Chris, Dr. McPhee both. We can't make other programs' schedules. We can only take care of ourselves.

That's something, that's why right now, if more teams would do that, then our conference NET would be a lot higher than it is now. Instead of being in the top 13 or 14 conferences in the country, we'd be in the top 5 or 6 conferences in the country if they would schedule like us, but they're not going to do that.

I'm very much -- and I don't want to seem cocky, but I'm not really concerned about how many games I win or lose right now. I'm concerned what I can do for our program, and I've always been that way since Dr. McPhee and Chris hired me back in '05.

I think the first year that we were able to schedule, when I got hired, the schedule was made. But the first team that was on our schedule was Maryland. They had just won the year before's National Championship, and with four minutes to go, we got beat. But with four minutes to go, we were leading.

I think our fan base at that time saw, hey, we've got to change here. Of course Pat was living then, and we were close friends. She was -- we were fortunate enough that



she was scheduling us sometimes two and three games at Tennessee and one game with us, but it didn't matter. We wanted to be where she was at.

We're not going to get to where she was at, but I think, if you look at what our fan base is right now, it's kind of a miniature fan base that Pat had back when she was going wide open.

Q. Sunday night at the Selection Show, we were in a packed venue right across from our campus watching your front row, watching with the team. When Louisville popped up as a 6, what was your thinking? Were you thinking we're going to be against Louisville, or were you just waiting to find out?

RICK INSELL: No, my first -- I didn't have any idea who we'd play, but when Louisville popped up, the first thing on my mind was Jeff Walz. He's a close friend of mine. So we get to go to battle again.

Jeff is one of the good guys. He takes his program out, and he plays people, like Middle Tennessee State University. There's a bunch of them out there that will not play Middle, but Jeff's not one of those people, one of those coaches. He plays us, and he plays other people around the country, and he has a good nonconference schedule. There's not many of them around. We appreciate him.

Tomorrow will be a battle. He'll come to win, and we'll come to win.

Q. With how hard it is to get other teams to play or to schedule as difficult as you guys in the non-con, how much more impressive is it for this program to go to the NCAA Tournament as much as it does when you have to basically roll through your conference when you have to play maybe a tougher schedule than other people might?

RICK INSELL: We recruit to the fact that we're going to the NCAA Tournament. We've been here 19 years, I think, going into our 20th year, and we've been in either the NCAA Tournament or the NIT, one of the two, and we recruit to that, and we recruit to our schedule, and we recruit to our fan base. All of that kind of runs hand in hand together.

It's tough for us to get games. We have to constantly stay on top of it. Right now we've got a pretty good schedule next year. Again, we're scheduled to play Louisville again next year. We're scheduled to play Tennessee again next year. And we've been contacted by Southern Cal. We're not going to back down from anybody.

Do we win them all? No, we don't. But you can't win some of them if you don't schedule them. Every now and then, we get one in, sometimes two. That helps us again on our NET ranking.

Q. Courtney and Savannah were up here just before you talking about what this moment means to them. I'd like to flip that around and have you talk about what they have meant to you in this program.

RICK INSELL: Oh, shoot. It will be a sad day for me when I have to walk up the ramp at the glass house, and Courtney Whitson and Savannah Wheeler are not walking up with me. You've got two competitors there that hate to lose, and it's going to do what they've got to do to win.

But then you look on the other side, you've got two student-athletes there, great students. I think Courtney's won the presidential award, which is the highest award that can be given to our student-athletes. I think she's won that twice. They don't give that away. You earn that. That's the type of young ladies that you're looking at.

And they're special. I mean, they're mentors to the other young ladies that play with them. They'll go on out into the world with their passion, but there will still be something in their heart about what's going on at Middle Tennessee State University.

Q. Just wondering, when you're playing another major basketball school from the same region, does it add any kind of layer in terms of intensity or environment, you know, one you're familiar with with a coach that you like and respect?

RICK INSELL: You're right, it is intense. When we play the schools inside the state of Tennessee, sometimes they put these things out where we own the state. Well, they don't own us. We're not going to say we own them either, but they don't own us. They know when they schedule Middle Tennessee State, the Lady Raiders, they're in for a ballgame.

Afterwards, we shake hands and go on our way because we are. We can't get the likes of like Vanderbilt. They're down the road 15 minutes, 20 minutes from us, they got a fan base, we got a fan base. Our NET ranking is better than theirs, but we can't get them on the schedule.

Q. In terms of playing in the first round of the tournament against a team like Louisville --

RICK INSELL: It's the same way, competitive. Jeff probably has beaten us worse than anybody in the history

of our program, and I remember him calling a timeout. We only got 20 points, and I think they got 80, and he stopped pressing. I called a timeout and went down and said, hey, we want to you press. We're not going to get mad. We can't get better if you don't press.

I think we ended up going to the NCAA Tournament that year. Diane, you were there with us. We want you to give us your best shot because that's what we're going to give you.

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