

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

## Middle Tennessee Lady Raiders

## Rick Insell

## Savannah Wheeler

## Jalynn Gregory

### Media Conference

Middle. Tenn. - 71, Louisville - 69

THE MODERATOR: Middle Tennessee has the win over Louisville. We are joined by head coach Rick Insell. We have Jalynn Gregory and also Savannah Wheeler.

Coach, we'll give you an opportunity for an opening comment, then questions for the players.

RICK INSELL: Someone yesterday asked me about our slow starts. I said I hope we didn't have one. Well, we had one. I thought they come out ready to play. I mean, I knew that Jeff was going to have them ready. I knew that he was going to use the last time they played us as motivation. We tried to get that across to our players.

We had some defensive assignments missed. They made some great shots, took us to the basket. The ball was falling for them.

We hung in there and got back at halftime. I think we were down 11 at halftime. We talked about cutting that in half by the end of the third quarter. I think we ended up taking the lead by the end of the third quarter. That put us right in it.

Basically it came down to guts and willpower, who was going to will themselves to victory. I'm awfully proud of our young ladies.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the players.

**Q. Savannah, you seemed to really take coach's halftime message to heart. Had 14 points in that third quarter. What changed for you coming out of the**



locker room at halftime?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: Well, in the first half, I missed a lot of easy baskets. I mean, the first play of the game, I missed a layup. Three or four layups I missed in the first half. At halftime they just kept telling me I have to hit those.

Going off what coach said, that's something we have a slow start the first quarter. I kept telling myself to keep staying aggressive and just keep playing within myself and eventually one is going to fall.

**Q. Jalen, talk about finishing in the fourth quarter. Seemed like it was your time.**

JALYNN GREGORY: Yeah, it was just something that I have to do for my team. We're a great team. We each have our nights. Tonight just happened to be my night. Savannah picked it up.

We know what it felt like last year when we got beat and we did not want to relive that moment. We really just pulled together and finished the game.

**Q. Savannah, you outscored Louisville 44 to 31 in the second half. What defensive adjustments did you make at halftime?**

SAVANNAH WHEELER: I mean, really I think our defense was pretty good in the first half. It's just we weren't hitting shots. If you look at our free throws, 23 for 33. If we would have made all our free throws, we'd probably beat them by close to 10 maybe if we would have hit those.

Our defense was still there in the first half. We just didn't hit. We're a team that we don't give up. We keep playing hard. We keep fighting. Our crowd, I mean, our fan base, they traveled down here supporting us. Got to credit them. They definitely played a role in the turn of momentum in the second half.

**Q. Jalynn, the huddle right at the end of the first quarter, you're down 14, what was the message that led y'all to get a spark?**



JALYNN GREGORY: Honestly, it's a blur. If I had to guess, it was probably that we weren't going to lose the game. We had to step up and take control, just like we have this past year. It was probably just telling us to lock in.

**Q. What did coach say to y'all at halftime when you were down 11 points?**

SAVANNAH WHEELER: I mean, basically just we got to hit shots. We had a lot of good, open looks. We just had to bury them. This one right here comes out like 3-3. She definitely got us going the first half. Once one starts clicking, eventually some others are going to start clicking. I think that's what really played a role in this.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with questions for coach.

**Q. Today was one of those days where things didn't go like you wanted to start the game, but you had your halftime talk, the second half being the second half.**

RICK INSELL: I don't think the halftime talk was anything except the fact we got to take care of business. I looked at all of them and said, We're not losing. We got this thing cut to 11, let's cut it half. Fortunately we took the lead. At that point our crowd got in it. I think our players realized that this is a ballgame.

We've been a lot of close games this year. We won a lot of games by 26, 27 points. We've been close in games going into the fourth quarter. We've been tied up, I don't know, maybe seven or eight, even more than that games. We would take it on out and win it by 21, 25, 26 points in the fourth quarter. We knew the fourth quarter all year long has kind of been ours.

We came out, we did what we needed to do. We missed some free throws down the stretch. Ta'Mia missed a couple. Jalynn missed a free throw. Courtney missed two. We don't do that. We're a very, very, very good free-throw shooting team, probably one of the best free throw shooting teams in the country. It surprised me when I saw that happening out there.

**Q. It seems like Louisville was really dominating the boards in the first quarter that led to a lot of their early success. How did you adjust to get more rebounds?**

RICK INSELL: I don't know that we did adjust, to be honest with you, because we knew going in we had to keep them off the boards. They were just monsters on the

boards. They've got some very athletic, tall young ladies that's got great athleticism. They just went in there and just got the rebounds, just muscled it in.

I thought early on we missed some defensive assignments. We gave them some straight-line drives that we shouldn't have given up. They converted every one of those. I think it was like four straight-line drives they got in the first quarter. I'll look at the film. But we can't have that.

**Q. This is your first NCAA tournament wins since 2007. Do you feel like this win validates that you belong?**

RICK INSELL: It's not like that we hadn't been trying to win. We lost three of those games by one point. I think we lost to Michigan State, we led 39 minutes and 45 seconds. Against Mississippi State, think we led 39 minutes and maybe 10 seconds. They beat us at the end of the game. That was tough.

I'm just sitting here watching a lot of the young ladies that was on that team is texting us right now. I'm sure they got tears in their eyes. We had total control of both of those games. We ended up losing 'em.

This group right here, they've got so much grit. They're not going to quit, give up. Most teams would have quit out there tonight. I've seen that happen. I've seen the already happen in this tournament. Teams get down 12, 14 points, next thing you know you're down 25.

We went to work there in the second quarter and scored five straight points when called a timeout. That put us back in a good frame of mind coming to the bench.

**Q. Could you put in perspective, you look on paper, 11 seed is down by 18 to Louisville, a 6 seed, you pull off not only the third largest comeback in NCAA women's tournament history but you come all the way back before the end of the third quarter. Can you put that in perspective?**

RICK INSELL: If you're in our practice every day, everything we do is timed. I think some of you were there yesterday. That kind of gets your mindset where it needs to be. Every drill, everything we do, running the floor, we got it timed.

Well, when we got those five points back there in the second quarter, at that point I could see our whole body language, demeanor changed. Courtney came back in. If you look, Courtney is one of our better players. Two for nine, one for six from three. That is unusual right there. But she got seven rebounds, seven points. Then you got

Naz that ended up with 11 points, 12 rebounds. Double-double. We hit the baskets when we had to hit 'em.

**Q. On Wheeler, two points in the first half, 20 in the second.**

RICK INSELL: That doesn't surprise me. That's why she's Player of the Year in our conference. That's why she's MVP of the conference tournament, that right there. She's a scoring machine.

Just when you think you got her stopped, she slides through and gets a three. The next thing you know, she hits another three. Then she hits a little two floater there. Our fan base has seen her hit those all year long. I knew when it left her hands it was in. I could see the look on their face, they were startled she let it go because the big kid was all over the top of her.

A large part of us winning the game was their big girl getting four fouls and having to go out. We made a big push when that happened. They didn't have anybody else like her and we didn't either.

**Q. It was a big defensive adjustment in the third quarter. What was the big defensive adjustment?**

RICK INSELL: We didn't have a whole lot of defensive adjustments, to be honest with you. We played it straight up just like we did at the beginning of the game. We were just getting over and covering. We were picking up their sets. We didn't do a good job early. We did a good job late.

When they started making that pushback, that guard got three floaters in a row. We didn't need that to happen. It was a very poor job on our part. We were up nine, she comes in and hits three floaters, we're up three. We have to do a better job than that.

**Q. Getting this far also speaks about your confidence that y'all are in. Talk about how that confidence in the conference tournament prepared you for this season.**

RICK INSELL: I'm going to be honest with you, I hate to bring up these two programs, but we have got two programs in our conference that's been to the Final Four. One of them has won the national championship. Maybe more than one. So we got a pretty good conference.

LA Tech, Western Kentucky, you can come down the line, UTEP. They all have good players and good coaches. From the very beginning, first game in our conference season, LA Tech took us to overtime. We had to win the

game in overtime.

Right at the end of the year to finish this thing out for us to go undefeated, we had to play two of the toughest teams in our conference back to back. One of them is Liberty, the other was LA Tech. Liberty just come to our conference this year. Look at the success they had in the conference they were in. I think they dominated and won it year in and year out.

Conference USA is a pretty good conference. It's going to get better. It's going to get better because we're bringing in Delaware. I'm really proud to be Conference USA, to be honest with you.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, appreciate your time.

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