

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

Louisville Cardinals

Jeff Walz

Merissah Russell

Olivia Cochran

Media Conference

Middle. Tenn. - 71, Louisville - 69

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your time. The microphone is yours.

JEFF WALZ: First, I'd like to congratulate MTSU and Rick and his team. I thought they played extremely well, continued to fight, just compete.

It was just a really, really bad second quarter and third quarter for us. It's been kind of the story of our year, unfortunately. We'll have two good quarters, two solid quarters, then we have two that we don't play well. It's not just on the offensive end, it's the defensive end.

We're going to have to go back now, with the players that we have returning, we're going to have to really evaluate what can we do as coaches to help change that.

I thought we did a lot of good things. I thought we played at the pace we wanted to play in the first quarter, a little bit in the second quarter, then unfortunately just did not come up with plays when we needed to there late in the game.

THE MODERATOR: Let's take questions for the players first, Merissah and Olivia.

Q. Coach just mentioned two good quarters, two quarters that were mediocre. Talk about the team's mental.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yeah, it's very painful right now (tearing up). He's right. We got to finish games. He's mentioned it before in the locker room. We have to finish



games. We did this at Notre Dame, in the ACC tournament. This hurts. Sorry. He's going to come in here and take the blame, but it's on us as a team, as players. It's hard.

He's a great guy, a great coach. We've been here for four years and we know the culture here, we know the standard here. This is not it.

I apologize to our fans, to our administrators, our staff. This is not our women's basketball. Our alumni. This is not who we are. I feel like a failure and I apologize.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I ain't got nothing to say.

Q. Did you notice anything different? Did you feel good coming in?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Yeah, we felt good. I thought we was going to win the game. Like Coach Walz said, we just had a bad second half. We've been doing that all year. We've been trying to emphasize that Cards fly in March. We didn't fly today.

We just going to keep working during the spring and the summer and work on us and get our culture back. We just got to learn to be tough. We got to learn how to fight adversity, which we haven't been doing all season, so yeah...

Q. You talked about the standard of this program. How much can this be used as fuel? It's easy motivation. Could you explain that for you all.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yeah, I give our team props. We finished last year with four players on our roster and the coaches did a great job of recruiting and getting these girls. They bought in as much as they could. It's not easy.

I've been here for four years, I played for this guy. It's an up-and-down roller coaster. He loves us. He holds us to a high level. We want to be, so we hold each other too.

We have a big roster coming back, more returners coming back, so that's going to be really good in terms of carrying



that culture over and having this bad taste in our mouth throughout the whole spring and summer. We have time off now, then we're coming back early. Let's just get to work and use this as fuel.

Q. What do you say to these players who just got here this year to get them to know this is not what we do?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Got to get in the gym. It start in practice. We got to learn how to go hard in practice. That's what's going to carry over on the court, how hard we go, our motor. We got to have a better motor, we got to give better effort.

I feel like this team, we just joined together, we had to learn so fast. That's why we were so up and down, roller coaster.

The four years I played, I done played on four different teams. It's just how you adjust to it, how buy in, yeah. We just going to get in the gym this summer and work. Who want to stay stay, who want to go go.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: 100%.

Q. Y'all are up 16 points in the first quarter, then just an avalanche hit you in the second and third quarter. What went wrong?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: We fouled too much. Gave them opportunities on the free-throw line. Like I said, we didn't play hard. Sometimes we didn't box out, rebound. We needed one rebound to get one shot, and we couldn't come up with it. We just got to learn how to finish games, like I said, play through adversity.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Big emphasis was playing all 40 minutes of the game. Obviously we didn't do that today. That's why that happened. We didn't do that. The mental focus, kind of staying locked in the entire 40 minutes, it's not what we did today.

Q. In terms of the fouls, MTSU seemed to think it was quite a big deal when you got your fourth, had to sit for a bit. Some games just go like this. Was it anything they did or was it just tough calls?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I don't really know how to answer that. My coaches emphasized we need you in the game, O. Don't foul. Some of the calls was tough. Some of the calls I got was dumb fouls on me. I take full responsibility for that.

Like I say, when I got on court, I battled, I went hard for my teammates, for my coaches. I'm sorry (tearing up).

JEFF WALZ: You're fantastic. You both are.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: That's the one thing about Olivia. I played with her for four years. I've never doubted she's going to go on the floor and give her best.

We were down, I don't even know, in that fourth quarter. She's like, We got to go till the last second. She did that. I'm so proud of her. We've known each other for years. We're going to do this again for another year. This is not it. This is not it.

I keep saying it, Coach Walz is a great coach. We don't pay attention to social media. I have to say, he's made some comments, obviously the NIL stuff, about the turnovers. He's a great guy. I just don't like, some people say some stuff about this guy, he can't say it by himself because he's lovely.

As his player, I've been here for four years, I'm coming back for five years. I don't know who sees this. We're coming back because of him. We're going to go further in this tournament next year. I promise you that.

I don't care who is listening, I don't care who is watching, we're coming back. He's a great - I want to swear, sorry - F'ing coach and that's why we're coming back.

I don't care what other people have to say, I don't care what coaches are saying, other teams. Recruits, if you want to win, come here. I don't care. This is a different season, a different team. We're going to hold our team to a higher standard. We're leaders here, that's what's going to happen next year. That's a promise.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: For sure.

THE MODERATOR: You're as far from failures as possible. Not even close. Thank you for your time.

JEFF WALZ: I love you, baby. You know that. I'm proud of you.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take a few questions for coach.

Q. Your players talked about what you all talk about every day, coming back. You get as far as you can go with the kids that you have that want to play. Talk about this particular squad and the two young ladies that just walked away.

JEFF WALZ: I love this group. I told 'em in the locker room that it's been one of the most enjoyable seasons that I've had. Had no drama. They're great kids. I call 'em

'kids' because I treat them like they're my own kids. I love them like they're my own.

As I always say, my two are about two of my four behind me, and my two don't like me all the time either, because it's called parenting. You have to discipline sometimes. They both know I love them. My players know I love them, as well.

It just sucks. Nobody wants to go out this way. I mean, it was a roller coaster of a year. I'm not making excuses. I just state facts. I was pushing 'em pretty darn hard there in the middle of February, in that game at Syracuse took a lot out of a few of 'em. When you're getting pushed and challenged and all of a sudden that shit happens, it was like, Oh, you're kidding.

Then today, it's not an excuse, it's part of life. Syd gutted it out for 30 minutes, and Syd is sick. Syd never asked to come out of a game. That's part of it. It's not an excuse. I felt really bad for her. You go through an entire season, I don't think she's been sick all year, and you get to the game in the NCAA tournament.

I saw her this morning at breakfast. You going to be okay?

I'm fine, I'm fine.

For those that follow us a lot, you could just see it energy-wise from her.

But O and Riss, I'm really proud of 'em. They competed, they fought. We didn't make some plays when you had to make plays. You tip your hat to them. They made some big shots when it mattered. We had some shots, we were up two, up three, if you make it you're back to five. We had a couple threes that went in and out.

You go back, you're going to go back and look at things, what could have been. The transition basket in the second quarter that got waved off, a travel is called, it was going to put it at 20. It's like, Okay, can you keep rolling? She very well may have walked. It's one of those like, Oh, damn. You had that opportunity.

The thing that we talk to our players about is every possession this time of year you have to play with urgency. Every possession matters. Every single one. Unfortunately we didn't do a great job of playing every possession with that type of urgency.

Again, give a ton of credit to MTSU and Coach Insell and his staff because they played a really good basketball game.

Q. What made this team so enjoyable? How do you put everything into perspective? This is a first for you, too, losing in the first round.

JEFF WALZ: I'll start with that. It sucks. There's no other way to put it. We have had a ton of success here in post-season play. This is not what we're used to. I'll take the responsibility for that.

I mean, I've got to get back to doing things the way I've done 'em in the past. I've got to challenge 'em more. I've got to get 'em in shape. I've got to demand things, demand more from them.

Practice can't be comfortable. It's got to be uncomfortable. So then when you get in the games, no matter how hard it goes, you've experienced all of that in practice. So I've got to get back to just taking some things over and really challenging them and pushing them. So that's my fault.

But they're great kids. I mean, nobody's complaining about somebody else shooting. Nobody's complaining. They just wanted to win. It's been enjoyable, it really has. It's been great.

The year went by as fast as I've had in a long time. There have been a few years that we've been really good, and it's February. I'm like, Damn, this shit over yet? It was just a grind. But this group's been fantastic.

I'm excited about our incoming class for next year, excited about our returning players. I think our future's really bright. I think we're going to make great strides next year, especially with O and Riss coming back.

Elif has gotten better and better. It's a kid that I saw play the first week in August, then is on campus in September. I recruited her for two weeks, convinced her to come. She knew nobody. She really didn't even have a pre-season at all. Now we've got the opportunity to have a post-season with her, spring workouts, summer. I think she's only going to get better.

Q. I noticed your physical reaction as the last shot hit the rim and went out. Could you say what you were thinking at that point.

JEFF WALZ: We missed it (laughter). I mean... Hey, Riss got off a look. When I watch, it's got a little bit of a chance. We'll see what happens. It didn't go in. I mean, it's one of those...

Of course it sucks. I hate to lose. I hate to lose at anything. But at the same time I've done it my entire career, I'm going to make sure I go down to the other end

and give respect to the coaches, their players, wish them luck, congratulate 'em, because it's what you're supposed to do.

We have won a lot here. We have won a lot. I respect the coaches that do that. I've always told myself I'm always going to do it. We've lost some heartbreakers. It's never going to change. Are you upset you lost? Yes. But you also know to simply walk down to that other end, congratulate the players and the coaches.

THE MODERATOR: Jeff, thank you for your time. We appreciate it very much.

JEFF WALZ: Thank you all.

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