

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Vanderbilt vs Columbia

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

Vanderbilt Commodores

Shea Ralph

Jordyn Cambridge

Sacha Henderson

Media Conference

Vanderbilt 72, Columbia 68

SHEA RALPH: I'm going to try to keep this short and sweet. We've got to get back and get some rest. First of all I want to congratulate Columbia on a great season. I know we are all really excited as coaches and teams to be in the NCAA Tournament. So congratulations to them.

Second of all, congratulations to my team, my players, for grinding it out. We are not just happy to be here. We have a purpose. And today was the first step in that purpose. We prepared all year for this moment. This was our goal from the moment we got together in June and I'm excited for my players that we get to keep dancing.

Q. How does it feel that you guys won this game?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: It's been a long-time coming and I've really been waiting for this moment since I got to college and like I said the other day, it's just -- it can't be more special than this getting this in my final year and -- oh, my God, I'm getting emotional.

It's really special and I'm excited for my team and excited for how hard we worked to get here, all the time and effort we put in, we're not done yet obviously and I'm excited. I'm excited that in my last year I get to do this.

Q. Seems like you were able to find a lot of space in the post. What led to your success there?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Just my teammates trusting me and helping me get open and you know, like getting the ball inside out, outside in, just working it back-and-forth.



Q. After that fourth foul, you have to come out of the game, I think that was a turning point for your team. It's hard to be away in those moments. What did you see and how proud did that make you?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: First of all, it's not my first time being in foul trouble this season, but I trust my teammates, and even though I had four, there was no doubt in my mind. I knew we were going to win the game.

Obviously you have to adjust. With me not being out there but I trust the people that come in for me and obviously they handle it, even when I had four and I came in and got another silly foul and got five and I was done.

I still trust my. Teammates and I'm going to be on the bench, and I'm going to cheer for them and I'm going to talk them up from the bench and do as much as I can, but I trust them that they did what they needed to do.

Q. In the last two minutes what was going through your head?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: Let me just say, Iyana Moore is a dog. She is just a phenomenal basketball player, and obviously she's worked hard to get back to where she is now, super confident in herself and we are super confident in here.

Honestly there's no shot that she takes that I don't think is going in. So when she got that big shot like at the end of the game, before she even caught it, I knew it was going in because that's how much confidence I have in her. And every time she steps up for the moment, she's going to knock down the big shot and she's going to make big plays for us. That's what she does because she's a dog. Very, very grateful for Iyana.

SACHA WASHINGTON: Yeah, I agree. Everything that Jordyn said, I mean, big-time players make big-time plays and we wouldn't have it any other way with Iyana Moore. She's a great teammate, great player, great everything. I mean, she helps us so much and we're so grateful.

Q. I wanted to follow up on Coach's opening statement about how you guys had to grind it out and you had to redo that jump ball at the beginning. For either of you guys, can you take me through what it felt like to play in that game, to weather the runs on both sides and what it felt like grinding that out?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I mean, this is nothing new for us. I mean, the SEC is so physical. It's something that you have to do every night is a grind. So for us, this is nothing new. We know we have to play to the end and it not over until it's over. So I think just knowing that, like, just keep playing, got us in.

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: First, I think everybody that's in this tournament is obviously a really good team and they earned the right to be here and it's basketball, and so people are going to go on runs but it's about how we respond to them.

So of course, they are a good team, they are going to go on runs, but so are we. And it's never a point that like, oh, my gosh, they are going on a run; it's over. That's not how we think because leading up to this, we've had games where people go on runs, and we fight back. And that's what we did, and that's how we came out with the win.

Q. You ended the SEC season with a tough loss to Florida. How do you have short-term memory after a game like that, and what have the conversations in the last week looked like to reset to back to Vanderbilt basketball?

SACHA WASHINGTON: It's a growing moment. I think the biggest thing is having short-term memory. So it happened, and let's move on. Like we have bigger things that are approaching and we have no time to dwell on the past. Just moving forward and taking the things that we did, learning, moving forward and being better.

Q. Obviously you have a team full of primarily players who have not played in the NCAA Tournament before. How pleased were you with being able to win a close game like that and being able to weather all the comebacks by Columbia?

SHEA RALPH: I couldn't be more proud of my team, and like these two spoke before, we've some ebbs and flows all season. We had a really stuff stretch there in the SEC, obviously in the tournament. I felt like we were excited but moment was really big and it got a hold of us and we just were not able to get out of its grip.

So that opportunity led to us being able to learn a very valuable lesson in a tournament setting where we got the

chance now to be in the NCAA Tournament, and understand what it looks like and feels like to be ready for the moment.

You know, and the moment is going to feel different. There's going to be adversity. We faced it all year. We've faced it since we've been here in a bunch of different forms. So getting them to understand, just like Jordyn said, we are not reacting. We are responding. We are going to continue to respond to whatever adversity comes our way so we represent ourselves, the work that we do, our team, our program, but also our university the right way. We are just really excited to not only be here but to be able to get this first win today was huge for our team, for our program, for the future of our program.

Also just want to say, Jordyn Cambridge, you guys saw a little bit of her emotion. She's the heart and soul of our team. When we got here, that kid had gone through a ton. She's a sixth-year senior. She didn't have to play this year. She tore her Achilles' last year before the season started, and that could have been it for her.

She's got a third degree from Vanderbilt which I think there serve her well in life but there isn't a better ending for a kid like that. There isn't anyone that's worked harder or that's put more into this program and that's invested more in Vanderbilt University. I love that our players get to see that because they are seeing what it looks like for hard work and perseverance to pay off.

Q. We were able to talk to Jordyn and Sacha, but can you talk about how big Iyana Moore was tonight?

SHEA RALPH: Iyana Moore is another player that I'm really excited about for a bunch of different reasons. She also had a major injury last year. She was huge tonight but she's been preparing. Before she went down last year, she was practicing like a pro when the moments when the lights were on.

So I don't know that she understood what it was going to feel like to have the game taken from her, and when she got back out on court, the kid was a different player. She had a different investment in the game. She had a different investment in her teammates. She had a different investment in herself and becoming great, and I think what you're starting to see now is what it looks like when a kid does that.

She is a pro, but she's only a sophomore in terms of basketball. So the sky is the limit. These moments are huge for their growth. You can't create this in practice. You can't. You can't create a moment like tonight in practice, or even in your regular season. So this is only

going to elevate our team and our players as we move forward, especially Iyana.

Q. After their conference tournament, Columbia's coach made some comments, being a little critical of the number of SEC teams that got and you obviously said that you were proud to represent this conference. How do you think the SEC play and the grind of that season prepared you guys for what you saw tonight?

SHEA RALPH: Well, I think when you think about the NCAA Tournament, and I've been lucky enough as a player and a coach, this is my 20th time in the NCAA Tournament.

So while this is my first time as a head coach, it's certainly not my first rodeo, and I know what it looks like and I know what it feels like. I know when you play in this tournament. You've got to come through the SEC, sometimes multiple times, you've got to come through the SEC.

So what I love about the opportunity that we had today, not only to represent the SEC but to represent ourselves. We are the best conference in the country, and the reason that we are who we are right now is because we have to grind it out against the best teams in the country day-in and day-out.

So I'm proud of my team. I'm proud of the platform that we had to represent the SEC and we are going to keep going now.

Q. Can you speak a little bit to how y'all executed the scout, and particularly the defensive focus there, especially in that first half locking them down?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I didn't think we did so hot the first four minutes there. We gave up a couple of wide-open layups.

But we worked extremely hard on our defense all year. That is where we hang our hat as a team. I feel like on your worst offensive night, because you're going to have days where you just feel like you can't throw it in the ocean, you can always lock up defensively. But that's more of a mindset than anything.

So we really instilled that in our players early on. We played a bunch of different defenses. Today we felt like we could switch a lot with them and make it difficult for them, especially number 35, Abbey Hsu, to get her shot off easily.

We mixed up some switches, but for the most part I thought we did a pretty great job. They had to make tough

shots. I think we could have limited our fouls and done a much better job on the board.

But no matter what, our players know, we have to come out and grind it out on the defensive end, get stops and scores, stops and scores, great looks. Eventually our offense will come but usually easy offense for us is generated by our defense. So scouts look the same pretty much. It just depends on who we are playing.

Like tonight, we had a certain scout for their style, but our defense never changes. Our intensity on defense never changes. Our focus on defense never changes. That is who we are and that is how we hang our hat as a team, and I was proud from start to finish today. I thought we did a pretty good job.

Q. I think the defense in the SEC is really something that a lot of teams hold their hat on. Can you speak to what about the SEC defense is unique, and then why it's just such a part of the culture in the conference?

SHEA RALPH: Right. Well, first of all, I think it's a pretty physical league. There's physicality. And like I said before, it's kind of hard to put your finger on it. There's a mindset, and you guys heard Jordyn describe Iyana as a "dog." The SEC has a lot of prayers and a lot of teams with that dog mentality. There's also some pretty incredible players, I'm not really big on how players are ranked but you're talking about size, athleticism, skill, versatility.

So what I love about the SEC is that you're going to see that physical play but you're also going to see a bunch of styles of defense. Some people switch a lot. Some people don't. You're going to see some zone, some sagging man. So I think that really prepares. What you are going to see though, every cut, every shot, you're going to get punched in the SEC and that helps us grind it out.

Today I felt like there were some ticky-tack calls. We're going to have to get used to how the game is called in the NCAA Tournament depending on the crew that we have, but we're ready to kind of fight through walls because of what we see in the SEC. It is physical. There's size; there's skill; there's versatility, and like you said, most people do hang their hat on defense, but I think that's why we were ready today.

Q. You have Baylor coming up on Friday. How do you guys plan to prepare to face a team of Baylor's calibre heading into your first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2014?

SHEA RALPH: We don't prepare any differently. So we -- it's one of the things that I've talked about with our team. It

is special to be in the tournament but our preparation is going to be exactly the same. I don't want them to feel like this game is any different than the games that we had in the beginning of the season.

Those had to be just as important because if we didn't do a good job preparing for those we wouldn't be here. So this game coming up, they are Baylor, that's fine. We're Vanderbilt. You know, we're Vanderbilt. They got to prepare for us, too.

So we are going to prepare for every single time like we do, day-in and day-out, day before the game, we've got to get rest, that's important. We'll scout. We'll get through our practice tomorrow, we'll go through our shoot around and then we'll roll the ball out and see what happens.

Q. You touched on it a little bit. In your experience, what does a win in the NCAA Tournament do for confidence, for momentum, and maybe not just this week or this season, but in the big picture going forward that you can recruit to, you have that postseason win under your belt, what does it do for you guys going forward as a program?

SHEA RALPH: I think it -- I know that it shows people that we mean business. We came here as a staff, I came here as a head coach, behind an incredible administration and athletic director who is sitting right behind you, because we had a similar vision in competing for championships and for maximizing the full potential of our student athletes on and off the floor. Vanderbilt is unique because you can do that.

We have a world-class university and we are on our way to having a world-class women's basketball program so when you come here, there isn't anything you have to give up. You can have it all. And so I think what this shows is that in our third year as a staff, we are moving in the right direction quickly, and you're going to want to get on this train.

You're going to want to get on this train because we are going somewhere really special, it's going to be fun. We have a great time. We're a family but when it's time to work we work and hopefully that's what people see.

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