

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vanderbilt vs Baylor

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

**Baylor Lady Bears**

**Nicki Collen**

**Sarah Andrews**

**Aijha Blackwell**

**Dre'Una Edwards**

Media Conference



SARAH ANDREWS: I low key kind of forgot that. I feel like I'm a little old now that you just said that. Yeah, it's kind of crazy to see them again in my last year of college. It comes back around a full swing. College goes by fast. I was just a freshman a few years ago, so to be playing them as a senior is kind of crazy.

**Q. Do you feel like this team has -- I think Nicki talked after the Big-12 tournament, you need to get back in the gym, get up some shots. Do you think this team has turned the page and is ready for this final chapter of the year?**

DRE'UNA EDWARDS: Yeah, I definitely think we turned the page. We've been in the gym constantly, nonstop, for the past like week and a half that we've been off and I think we're super ready. We've been prepared, we've had some great practices, especially the last three, four practices, we've been really dialed in, really locked in, so we're ready, for sure.

**Q. Going off that, last couple days didn't know who you were going to play. Is there a little bit more sense of relief now that you have an opponent and don't have to double-dip and prepare for two teams? Is there a little more relief now that you know it's Vanderbilt?**

DRE'UNA EDWARDS: It's definitely some relief, for sure. We've been going over both of their teams' plays, like, in practice and things like that and working on what we'll do defensively, for both of them, but now that we knew who, we could kind of set in and be like, okay, this is what we're going to do, this is our game plan, and things like that.

**Q. When Baylor's playing its best basketball, what do you feel like you guys are doing well in order to make that happen?**

AIJHA BLACKWELL: I think it all starts with defense. I think when we're -- when we have a defensive mindset, we come out strong, we come out gritty, we come out aggressive, and I think it just really enhances our offense. So it really starts with our defense.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Aijha, first time in the NCAA tournament. What's it like? What are your emotions? You've had a long career, but you're kind of finally here. What are the emotions?**

AIJHA BLACKWELL: Yeah, it's crazy to think I've been in college so long and haven't been in the NCAA tournament. I haven't seen it, but, also, like, the NCAA tournament hasn't seen me. I'm blessed to be here in this position with my teammates and anxious to get the tournament going.

**Q. Sarah, for you, you've been around the block a couple times now. What is your mindset going into this week? And you've had a couple tournaments under your belt, what's your mindset?**

SARAH ANDREWS: I'm excited. I think we have a few people on our team that hasn't been to the tournament and I think this group is so special. We haven't played in a while, so I think we're ready to get on that floor and play a 40-minute basketball game. We're going to come out shot like a cannon, so I'm excited to see us get on the floor and compete tomorrow.

**Q. Sarah, four years ago, your freshman year, during that COVID season you played Virginia Tech in the second round down in Texas. Does it feel like coming full circle that you're playing at Virginia Tech in your senior year for the NCAA tournament?**



**Q. Sarah?**

SARAH ANDREWS: I think it also starts with communication. I think we're at our best when we're communicating with each other, when we're accepting feedback from the coaches and from one another, when we're telling each other, hey, this is what we see and what we don't see. So I think it starts with defense and communication.

DRE'UNA EDWARDS: I think it starts with our preparation and our focus in practice. When we have really good practice and when we're really locked in and focused, we come up with a W every time. And we're really locked in on a game plan, knowing what we need to do, toning in on our defense, and our communication in practice is really good as well. So overall, I think it just comes down to our preparation and our determination and our focus.

**Q. Vanderbilt, having seen them last night, they're a team that's physical, they're a team that gets to the basketball. You all are great defending the three-point line, great shooting the three. What were your takeaways from Vanderbilt and what can you all do to be successful?**

DRE'UNA EDWARDS: I think our main focus is to just match their aggression and to play our game of basketball. Our defense makes us go, so I think us being defensive and being aggressive on the defensive end and rebounding the basketball. We can't let them get offensive rebounds, so we have to crash the glass and I think Aijha is going to do a great job of that, for sure.

**Q. Sarah, what stands out to you about Vanderbilt?**

SARAH ANDREWS: I think they're a great team coming from the SEC. They're a very tough team. They're going to crash the boards. I think we really have an advantage. We can get downhill at all positions. I think it's about us just playing Baylor basketball and not letting their physicality do anything to us. We know that we're going to have to finish over them because they're so long, especially at the guard size. So I think that's the biggest thing, is just not let the physicality take us out of our game.

**Q. Aijha, it's said that the tournament runs through the SEC. The Big-12 is right there as well. You guys played a tough schedule and had success against NCAA Tournament-caliber teams. How has that prepared you for this game and for the entirety of this tournament?**

AIJHA BLACKWELL: If you just think about it, just playing in the Big-12, you're playing night-in, night-out great teams,

aggressive teams. When I think about the SEC, Dre' and are pretty familiar with that and the aggressiveness they play with, so it will be like a memory and I guess we'll have to just go back out there and just play our game, play Baylor basketball.

**Q. Going off that, for Dre' and Aijha, what is it about Baylor, coming from your previous stops where -- that Baylor's enabled you both to thrive here and play some of your best basketball?**

DRE'UNA EDWARDS: I think it comes with just knowing the game, and Coach Nicki knows the game well. She knows how to put us in the right positions to score and be who we want to be. Like I said, Coach Nicki knows the game, so she knows how to put us in the right spots. Coach Tony is a great defensive coach as well, so he puts us in the right positions for defense as well, so we can excel on both ends of the floor and I think our coaches do a great job of just putting everybody in the right positions.

AIJHA BLACKWELL: I just think coming from my former team, here at Baylor, I wanted to take the defensive part of the game more seriously. I think I've really gotten better at that part of the game. Just that and then Coach Nicki, obviously, putting me in the best position possible. I was playing in the 3 in the beginning of the year. She moved me to the paint, and so that's probably where I got to eat more, so (laughing).

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you for your time. We'll have Coach up in just a few minutes.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll open up the floor to questions.

**Q. You had to wait a little bit to find out who the first opponent was going to be. When you saw it was Vanderbilt, what were some of the things that immediately came to mind about them?**

NICKI COLLEN: I think Shea has done an amazing job there. I watched them early in the season beat Iowa State in Vegas, and I'm always watching games, so I think kind of the turnaround in year three there has been really, really impressive.

But I think they play like a SEC team. They have some size, they have athleticism, they have got a lot of really, really good pieces. So a really good team, a team that's super motivated. Obviously, a team that when you are in a play-in game, you know that you just kind of were right there on the edge, and so wanting to prove -- have that chip on your shoulder to prove that you belong here, and



they certainly did that last night.

**Q. Jada Walker playing in her home state. I know with her and Jana, you've got a couple of really good ball handlers. How does that allow you to play to Jada's strengths in the tournament?**

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I think Jada's a player that does a good job playing downhill, certainly someone that needs to get a piece of the paint regularly. I think the two weeks we've had kind of leading up to this has been good, getting her back in the gym and getting a lot of comfort in that pullup jump shot, which I think is as good as really anyone in the country when she searches it.

So certainly we feel like we're going to have to play downhill and who we are. We're at our best when we're playing with pace in transition. So a lot of that starts with her.

**Q. You had almost two weeks to prepare. What's that timeline been like for you and the team?**

NICKI COLLEN: I think there's two sides to it. I think for us, I thought it was really, really productive for us just getting a lot of shots up, a lot of volume shots, really doing a lot of individual work, taking (inaudible). As much as there's shots that all of our guards get, they're all uniquely different. There's shots that all of our posts get, but they're all uniquely different. To me, it's been a really, really good cleanup as well as a shot volume kind of situation.

**Q. I was talking to Dre' and Aijha when they were in here earlier about why they have been able to thrive here coming from different schools. They both cited you and how you've been able to put them in positions to be successful, Aijha kind of playing more inside later in this year. Can you tell me more about how you feel like you've put them in positions to be successful, those two players?**

NICKI COLLEN: Well, I think neither one of 'em fits in a particular box. They're not true low post players, they're not true ball-handling guards. They're very hybrid-ish. I think we've got a lot of those players. We obviously had a lot of success in certain ways early. I think as the season went along, when there were gaps in terms of what our success looked like, it was about reassessing, where is Aijha being the most productive. Okay, let me get her back into that space.

We spent a lot of time talking to Dre' about, hey, like -- she shoots about 33 percent from three, and at some times doesn't get inside and take advantage of mismatches that I think she's capable of, but really getting her to understand

the threes that she makes. She's really, really productive inside the lane lines from three. She struggled from the corner, so getting her to understand that it's not -- we want her to take threes, we want her to take the right threes for her. When she can walk into those trail threes, when she can kind of be in that lane line, she's really, really good from out there. But playing off 2, playing on balance, and not being afraid to get in and mix it up, which is really kind of how they utilized her at Kentucky. She played inside a lot. So I think a big part of her wanting to be at Baylor was how we pick, slip, pop, play off the bounce, and use them both in different ways.

So I think for Aijha it's getting her back to her comfort zone. She's at her best, quite frankly, when she's talking and flexing on people inside the lane and not when she's out shooting threes. It doesn't mean she's incapable of making threes, but when we get her playing downhill, when we get her playing with a little edge and a little momentum, then it kind of snowballs for her.

**Q. I heard someone ask this to Dawn Staley. What does a player need -- if there's one thing, what does a player need to play for you?**

NICKI COLLEN: Heart. That seems so basic, but I'm really a basketball nerd. I love the game. I can point to the moment I fell in love with basketball and how it's kind of defined every part of my life since that point. So I very much consider myself a teacher of the game. My goal is always to keep giving back to the game that's meant so much to me. When you play for me, you got to want to learn. It's not about yelling and screaming and maybe I'm not the greatest motivator, but I'm going to show you the way.

I think I'm good at communicating how we need to do things, how you can be individually successful, how we can be collectively successful. But it's, like, you got to want to learn the game because we're going to teach the game, we're going to teach the terminology, we're going to teach the reads, we're going to teach -- and even with this team this year, I would love a huge playbook, but when push comes to shove this is not a team that's built for a big playbook. But we're talented enough and versatile enough that I've had to figure out how does this team succeed, what things can we run where we don't blow their mind away with 72 different plays and you got to start here and you got to go there, and so really getting 'em to play off one another and share the basketball.

**Q. The sweatshirt you have on, sometimes you, sometimes me, always us. What does that slogan mean in regards just to this year's team in particular?**



NICKI COLLEN: I think when we started the season, we didn't start with this. Ultimately, like, our team slogan is, Greater than. It's got biblical implications. But conceptually, like, the idea of being better today than you were yesterday, being greater than in every walk of life, whether it's how we communicate or how we go about classroom and what we do in the classroom.

But this was something, when this season started, we maybe don't have anyone on the first three All-American Teams, we don't have anyone that's on honorable mention. Does that mean we don't have great players? No. I think we don't rely on any one player to play to and play through. It can be different players on any different night. I think our first seven games we had six different leading scorer's and at some points in the season we've had eight different players on our team leading us in scoring with over 15 points.

So really at the end of the day, it's about feeding the hot hand, it's about taking advantage of the mismatches that we have, it's about moving the ball to the most open player. We've had success when it hasn't been, did I got my shots, did I get the most shots, did I get the most touches. It's about, hey, we won the basketball game, here's why, because we're deeper, because we're versatile, because we can take advantage of different ways that people are playing us because of our unselfishness.

Sadie Edwards on my staff tweeted it after one of the wins that we had and it's just kind of stuck.

**Q. How cool is it for someone like Jada Walker to be able to play a little bit closer to home than Waco, Texas?**

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, in the old days, and it really is the old days when the transfer portal wasn't what it is, and I think you tried -- when you signed a player, you usually committed to the family that if they were from far away, that you would try to find away to get back and play somewhere close to their home.

But in today's environment, that's really hard to do when you have players for one and two years. So you always -- and you always still needed to get a team to be willing to play you in that area. I know she was excited. And I didn't even think about it when it went up on the board, but she's like, That's home. Like, I get to go home. So I know as a coach's kid, she's moved some as well, but ultimately I think it's exciting for her to be near more friends and family.

**Q. Great game last night. That's a March Madness game. In terms of now that you know it's Vanderbilt, is there a sense of relief that it's just one team now and**

**now we have full focus on them for this next 24 hours?**

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I was just hoping with the game starting at 9:00 and it got close that they were going to play into overtime and maybe triple overtime and set some kind of NCAA record and we would be playing past midnight, and by "we," not me.

So, no, it was a great game. I think that was the biggest challenge of seeing the bracket come out. You've gone 10 days without an opponent to prepare for and you still don't, and so you're weighing not wanting your players to think you're guessing, and over time the more you watch both teams, the more you realize it's going to be a close game and predicting a winner is tough.

I thought Vandy did a great job on Hsu, but if she has a typical -- that game could have looked different if she has just a typical game for her. So credit to Vandy for taking her away and doing what needed to be done, they played through the paint, I thought their offensive rebounding and their shots at the rim. Moore made every big shot in the game. I thought she was phenomenal in terms of taking and making and keeping the game the distance there.

But it does feel good. I certainly have been watching both teams, but now you can actually kind of say, this is who we're playing, this is their tendencies, these are -- as opposed to kind of alluding to things that you're working at that could be, hey, both these teams run zoom action, both these teams run -- so you were working on some things that were commonalities, but obviously, when it comes to player personnel these two teams look different.

**Q. Is there a team you've had this year that maybe is similar to Vanderbilt or what teams come to mind maybe?**

NICKI COLLEN: Oh, man, I hate getting put on the spot. I don't know. I mean, I think the thing about them is you've got -- we see players -- like, Jackson's a relentless offensive rebounder in our league, so it's like you're trying to get your team to understand that Washington is going to go to the offensive glass the same way that Jackson did and how important it is to -- she's not just going to go, but she's going to get her hand on balls, when you do block her out, she's going to tip 'em. So you try to compare that to -- to me they're an execution team, their execution actions are not that dissimilar from Iowa State. A lot of stuff in the middle channel, a lot of tunnel action. Whether it's re-screens or, so there's a lot of -- they have a lot of different sets, but ultimately the ball tends to stay in the middle channel. There's a lot of screens with Moore and Washington in 'em. Cambridge can get down hill and make plays and is a little Quinerly-ish in terms of ability to



get steals and get her hands on balls. So it's, I don't know that it's easy to compare 'em to one team, but it's easy to compare things they do to things we have seen. I mean, they, you have to get them to play out of system to beat 'em. Like, you got 'em to play out of system. Because when they can screen, your tags have to be good on your ball screen coverage, your -- you have to know player personnel, who is a great shooter, who do we have to run off the line, who can we dig in off of, things like that. So I think that's kind of what we're used to though. Like, we're not a, we're not a light scout team. I don't know, our players probably dislike it, but we probably over scout. So they're used to that.

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