

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

Baylor Lady Bears

Nicki Collen

Bella Fontleroy

Jada Walker

Media Conference

Baylor - 80, Vanderbilt - 63

THE MODERATOR: We are joined on the dais by Bella Fontleroy, third double-double of the season for her with 19 points and 11 boards, Richmond's Jada Walker with a game high four steals, and head coach Nicki Collen.

We'll turn it to you for an opening statement.

NICKI COLLEN: Game of runs for sure today. Felt really good about the way we started, I think making shots early, playing downhill, kind of following the game plan. I thought our defense was really good, in particular in the first half when we didn't foul.

I thought we did a really good job making their execution tough, taking away passes so they couldn't smoothly get into things. And it's as well as we've shot, 9 for 21 from three, if we take away kind of some of those at the end.

I thought that created separation, especially Bella making open shots, Jana making open shots. I thought we did a good job moving the basketball and getting it to the most open player. They played some zone. They played some man. But ultimately we did a really good job on our ball screens and reading and playing downhill.

It really started with Jada, and I thought Bella was good all the way around all day.

Q. Bella, obviously a pretty good game. What was working so well for you tonight? And then what were your teammates doing to get you or put you in those positions?



BELLA FONTLEROY: We have been getting up a lot of shots lately, so I have been very confident in my shot. I have coaches that believe in me, and they tell me to shoot it whenever I'm open. So that definitely worked well for me from the three-point line and the free-throw line.

Also as a team, we moved the ball. We got to the open space. A big key for us was having pace, and we played with pace the whole night. That's why we got those open looks everywhere on the floor.

Q. Bella, I talked a lot yesterday that this team has one or two players -- not one or two players. Any player can kind of just go off, and tonight was your night. When did you kind of figure that out, and what was it like before the game that led to you having a good night?

BELLA FONTLEROY: Before the game, just locked in. It's tournament time. You want to advance, and you have to show up in every way you can for your teammates, whether it's rebounding, making shots, defending the best player. Like everybody tonight had a job, and every person on our team did their job.

Q. Jada, how much more confident do you feel right now than you did even a month ago?

PAIGE MEYER: Really confident. It's tournament time. We've been playing. We've been preparing and practicing. So at this time, it's just a time to perform, time to execute, and whoever does that the most wins. We did that today, and that's why we won.

Q. I guess I should have said individually confident, like do you personally feel like you're playing better now than you were not that long ago?

PAIGE MEYER: Definitely. Like she said, we've been in the gym. We've been shooting. We've been getting shots up. We've been preparing for every game that we're going to play. So I've been really confident.

Q. Eight turnovers in the second quarter kind of made



that game a little bit closer heading into the second half. What was the conversation like in the locker room before third quarter?

BELLA FONTLEROY: Stop turning the ball over. Literally just we were rushing. What worked so well for us in the first quarter was we played with pace, but we played to the open person, and we slowed down enough to make those reads.

The second quarter, we kind of were like, okay, we want to hit home runs. Coach Nicki always says hit a single or hit a double first. You don't have to hit a home run every time. So just slowing down and making those open reads, finding those people helped us stop turning the ball over so much.

Q. Kind of funny at the end, we're heading to the second round now, instead of the third, kind of putting the name on the bracket had a little funny thing.

BELLA FONTLEROY: We don't have to talk about that. Yeah, we fixed it. We fixed it. It's okay.

Q. Also, Jada, for you, family, friends coming here. What was it like playing for them? Did you get to see them before the game and after? What was it like playing in front of them?

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, I got to see some. We weren't really allowed to go up to the stands, so I just had to wave from a distance and go back to the locker room. Hopefully next game I get to see more.

THE MODERATOR: Bella and Jada, thank you for your time.

Q. Coach, how has Bella gotten better throughout the year? Is she kind of playing her best basketball at this moment?

NICKI COLLEN: I think what Bella brings is versatility, and I think -- you know, I can think of -- I think it hurt. I mean, she probably missed four open threes and a layup in the fourth quarter of the Iowa State game. She was 0 for everything on Senior Day.

She hasn't necessarily just always made shots. Early in the season she was shooting almost 50 percent from three. It was 30 percent in our 10-7 stretch.

So I think her getting back in the gym is a really powerful thing. Seeing the ball go through the basket -- you know, I thought early, getting her an early shot against their zone, we did a good job of playing against their matchup and

getting it swung to the open player. I thought we shot them out of the zone.

I thought the second quarter our turnovers were a result of they really ramped it up and got into their switching man to man and made passes a little tougher and sped us up, and we had some travels. Just we got ourselves caught in tight spaces.

I think the thing about Bella, even from her freshman year to her sophomore year, she understands a little more who she is, and she just gives us such good position versatility. Like she's capable of getting 11 rebounds every game. She doesn't always, but that's always the challenge. I think she's got this unique ability to not just shoot the ball, but she can bounce up.

You know, like when we get those transition layups -- we'll keep working on those with her. But she plays passing lanes. She plays against posts and switches. She just has a good feel. It allows us to switch a lot.

Certainly when we had 3, size at the 3, it helped with Oliver's post-ups. It helped with Pissott and her size. When we play small, you get a little nervous because they wanted to search out their thumbs down action and post us up.

I just think Bella understands that her role is a little bit different every game. If she's making shots, she's probably going to get a lot of shots. If she's not, she's going to be out there because she defends and rebounds and does a good job being a team player, takes charges.

Q. Do you see her becoming like a sharpshooter, three-point shooter, kind of just for her transition from freshman to sophomore year, double the amount?

NICKI COLLEN: I hope she's more than that, to be honest with you. I think her frame, she can take a hit. She can take a bump. We've got work to do on her low post game, really understanding angles and using her physicality, understanding how to change speeds off the bounce.

You look at it, I'm proud of her, two assists and one turnover. She doesn't turn it over a lot, but she doesn't get a lot of assists. She tends to be a recipient scorer, cuts, offensive rebounds, kick-out threes.

I think she's got -- her ceiling is so high because of her frame, because she's bouncy, because she's strong. Like I think she's got a lot of room for growth. She's obviously a really good player right now, but I think her ceiling is really, really high.

Q. How much of the focus over the last week has been on getting to the rim and kind of going downhill like that? It seems like Jada did that a few times. Dre did that.

NICKI COLLEN: I don't know, like you probably could have -- there were multiple times I just kept telling Jada, we don't need a play. If they're going to switch and put their 5 player on you, you've just got to go by her. I just felt like it was a key to playing against them.

When they're switching, like you've got to get downhill against them. You watch enough film, and you know that that's what you have to do. Like there are certain things they're really, really good at, and I just thought that was something we could exploit.

If we played downhill, we'd have drop passes. We'd get Jada to her jump shot. We really focused on her turning down the three a little bit and playing to her jump shot because, to me, when Jada gets the balance and bounce at 15 feet, it's as good as a layup for her. So really getting her to understand her spots on the floor and how she can impact the game.

Q. What kind of happened in the second quarter with the turnovers, and how do you kind of clean that up for the second round?

NICKI COLLEN: The turnovers were like -- there's not a good answer for that other than -- because they were all different. I really think, because we were shooting the ball so well against the zone, they turned up their pressure, and it wasn't full court at that point because we had done a good job breaking the press, the 2-2-1, but they switched to man, and they were jumping out in passing lanes and switching things.

So it just amped us up. It's kind of like the end of the game where all of a sudden now they're running, they're trapping. I thought they just played passing lanes, and they made us put it down. Then we'd kick it. It was just a little bit of everything. I think Buggs had three travels in that stretch just picking up her pivot foot. Not making bad decisions, but just making rushed decisions.

Then she's driving in there, she's trying to drop it, she sped up. They get a hand on it. We had a steal that we threw back to them that they threw back to us that we threw back to them. So it's that they just can kind of snowball.

When you looked at the halftime stats, besides Buggs turning it over, every single person had one. It wasn't like anyone was the instigator, the culprit, or whatever. It was just outside of Buggs' travels, which, quite frankly, we can

get our defense set with those. But when you have those live ball ones, they were playing downhill, they were getting to the foul line.

To me, defensively, our defense was really good when we didn't foul. Our ball screen coverage had to get better. We just had to have our drop coverage be a little bit better.

Q. Aijha has always been feisty and played that role all year. In a tournament like the NCAA Tournament, how important is that to this moment?

NICKI COLLEN: Aijha? Yeah, she's feisty, that's a good word. I thought she started slow, and I didn't love her energy to start the third. We knew they were going to go to Washington. She was in foul trouble, and she needed to play to her and through her.

I thought, when we took her out and put her right back in because Dre picked up two fouls, then I thought she was great. I really thought she was great.

We talked about that transition where she was playing the 3 early and switching her to playing the post more, when she recognizes, hey, I can get into early drags and make a living, when I can get into early step-ups and make a living, I just thought her energy really elevated.

She's always going to compete around the rim. I thought she missed some easy ones inside, but she's always going to compete. People don't realize, this is her first NCAA Tournament game. So don't tell me I don't care if you're a freshman or a fifth year senior, there's still nerves playing in this kind of game.

Has she played against Vanderbilt? Yes. But ultimately, like I still think it's a different stage. You're playing for something different.

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