

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Baylor vs Virginia Tech

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

Baylor Lady Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Sarah Andrews

Darianna Littlepage-Buggs

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Let's open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Congratulations on winning yesterday. You guys are one of the better teams in the country defending the three-pointer. What makes that the case for you guys? Why are you so good in that regard?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Our coaches really emphasize just being there on the catch and noticing, being aware of our shooters. So if we know we're playing a team full of shooters, we have to be a lot more aware. And just being aggressive and staying alert of where those shooters are on the court.

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah, being able to find our shooters. We're athletic enough to close out and get back in front when they try to blow past us. So just being there on the catch and making them try to blow past us downhill.

Q. Sarah, what kind of unique challenges does a team like Virginia Tech present even though they might not have their best player?

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah, praises go out to Kitley, but that's going to make them even more hungrier. They're playing for her. They want to win for her.

They're a great team with and without her. They have people that have stepped up. So we have to be ready to play, and the atmosphere that they're going to have tomorrow is going to be crazy.

But it's a unique challenge, and I think we're ready for it.



Q. Going off of that, environment, Cassell Coliseum presents a very unique challenge because it is one of the most intense environments in college basketball. What are you doing to combat that and prepare yourselves for that?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: I like to think of it as playing at home, at home. We have a great home court advantage with the noise. So I don't think it will too much of a difference. I just think that we have to really lock in tomorrow, and with that being, we'll the atmosphere.

Q. Sarah, I know played Virginia Tech a couple years ago, it's been a while. It's obviously a little bit of a different team. But what do you remember from that game, if you remember much?

SARAH ANDREWS: So just to go ahead and tell you all my age, how old I am. I don't really remember nothing from my freshman year. I think we won. But they're a different team, and we're a different team. So we both got to come out there and play.

Q. Sarah, where is this team right now? What's the confidence level, and especially after a game like you had yesterday? Is this team kind of maybe closer to where it was at the beginning of the season than in the middle?

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah, I think you said it best. I think this is a team that you saw start going out 13-0. I see the firepower in our eyes. We're 1-0 right now. We know the next game is not guaranteed. So we can take any plays off. That one play you take off could be the play that cost you the game.

We're ready to play. You can't get a challenge like this every day. Not everybody has a chance to be in this tournament. So we're just ready to play.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Like she said, it's one-and-done season. So we have to be intentional. And also, like she said, that that one play that we maybe miss can be the win or lose.



So we just have to be really intentional from here on out. And obviously don't think ahead, but take it one game at a time and just give it all that we have.

Q. You all had the unique challenge of 24 hours to prepare for Vanderbilt, versus a lot of other teams had a week to prepare for their matchups, and then have another 24 hours. How do you think the season has prepared you all for these quick turnarounds? Do you like being in that situation with crunch time and just a day in advance to prep?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: I think we're really good in crunch time. It makes you stay on your Ps and Qs a lot more because you have to pay attention a lot more.

So I don't think it's anything new to us. The season has prepared us, as we've had some games like that. It's nothing new to us. We're prepared. We just have to be very intentional with what we're doing from here on out.

Q. Sarah, we talked with your coach a couple days ago after practice, and she said you have one of the higher basketball IQs that she's coached, you know the why of why they're running something. And I know Coach Nicki is a very high basketball IQ coach. Has it always been that way for you? Have you been able to learn certain things from her that you didn't realize about the game? Tell me more about your growth.

SARAH ANDREWS: Basketball is everything for me. I've been playing basketball since I was four. So just to learn from Coach Nicki, first of all, she's coached where I want to be at at the end of the day. So I try to learn as quickly as possible.

And when it comes to basketball, you can tell me anything, and I'm going to try to go out there and perfect it to the art or whatever.

But I don't know, something about basketball, you teach it to me in the classroom or however you want to put it, I'm just a fast learner when it comes to it.

Q. With you guys being I think in the top 20 in the country when it comes to rebounding, has that kind of been a strong suit for you guys all year, and what's behind that?

SARAH ANDREWS: Yes, we can rebound the ball. I think we've shown in some games we can be very dominant on the boards. And I think tomorrow that's going to be a strong suit for us. We're going to have to rebound because we don't want them to rebound and get kickout threes.

That's when they're at their best, is knocking shots from outside. So we're going to have to rebound the ball, especially on defense.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: We have to be ready to box out because we don't want those kickouts. They have a lot of good shooters. So we just have to be ready.

Q. I know you've been at Baylor for a minute, but, Darianna, you're a younger player, from Oklahoma. What was it about Baylor that made you want to come be a Bear?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: A big part of it was legacy. There's a lot of stuff that comes with Baylor. And that was something I really wanted to be a part of.

And happy I got to be here because now it's kind of after we got a new coach. So it's just like a new team for us. And I just wanted to be a part of something great, and I think that's what we're doing right now.

Q. When you guys have been at your best this year, what do you feel like the potential of this team is?

SARAH ANDREWS: I feel like this sky is the limit. I feel like you could put us against anybody in the country, and we're going to prove everybody wrong and end up with the W.

I think we're at our best when we prepare the day before. We're locked in. You can tell us something, and we perfect it to the art. We communicate with each other.

I think there's a different type of look in our eyes that I see when we're going into certain games. That's why I'm so excited about tomorrow. If you are in that practice with us, and you just feel the energy that we have, it's so many positive vibes.

And everybody is just living for this moment and just want to prove people wrong. So I'm just excited to see this.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Yeah, super excited. Especially just to prove people wrong. But we're going to be very intentional. Like she said, we always have positive vibes. If you do step in practice, we're always having fun, but we're also communicating with each other and focusing in on the game.

Q. Sarah, I know you don't remember your freshman year, but you played for Kim Mulkey. You recall that, right? You stuck around after the coaching change, and obviously the program has continued to do well. From what you've noticed about Nicki, I guess, what's

kind of help the program stay a national power even though you had the coaching change?

SARAH ANDREWS: I think me, I've been here for four years. Being here my freshman year, I've been in positions. I know what it takes to win. I've cut down a net in a Big 12 Championship. Like just embracing like having Coach Nicki, like, Coach, I'm here with you. I stayed because I want to play for you, and I knew what she brought to the table.

And especially like if you look at this team, she's put together such a great team. And it's fun playing with these girls. These are my sisters, and it's an amazing team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for being here.

Questions for Coach Collen.

Q. Congrats on the win yesterday. What are your first thoughts of Virginia Tech and what they bring to the table without Kitley?

NICKI COLLEN: Well, I think we -- in our league, playing against Texas after they lost Rori, there's kind of that transition period of figuring out how different or how similar do you plug someone in and play the same way, do you play a little bit differently.

And so I feel like they were kind of in that phase in the ACC Tournament of figuring it out a little bit. But obviously I thought yesterday they were incredibly poised against the press, got good shots, made shots.

And so obviously a team that is really, really good from the three-point line. And I think they can still play into the paint, and it's finding that balance for Georgia and getting their shooters shots because it's obviously a strength.

You know, interesting stats on some of their shooters, there are players that 60 percent of their shots are threes. They've got players that 90 percent of their shots are threes.

And so you kind of know like they know their roles, and when they get their feet set, they're really, really good. So we've got to do a good job of taking away and contesting three-pointers.

Q. I know, Coach, it was a couple days ago we found out the news about Kitley. What was your initial reaction? Obviously a very sad situation. But you got to think it makes the job easier because she's one of the best in the country.

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I don't -- first of all, in this sport, when you have someone, three-time ACC Player of the Year, you know, I think her and Georgia's games fit so well together. ACC champions this year. So I think the timing is really, really tough.

You never are looking for an easy path. You're just not. Sometimes in particular you don't want your players to think that, hey, the task is any easier.

Like I feel like we're not just playing against five players tomorrow; we're playing against 10,005. Because I think the energy in this building will be insane. I think the people here will take it very, very personally to help this team and really be kind of a sixth man because of what Kitley has meant to this program.

And I certainly think they're going to show up either way, but I think that's going to be a key. Like we don't look at the task as easier. We just have to play our best basketball and stay poised and handle their runs.

And I'm probably going to have to use my timeouts so this building doesn't get so crazy when necessary. But I think they're a really, really good team either way and showed that yesterday.

Q. Coach, how much is Baylor kind of embracing that challenge of going up against a top team in a raucous environment in a one-and-done tournament? With all the seniors that you have, how much are you embracing this moment as a team?

NICKI COLLEN: Well, we started practice in July for our foreign trip. And certainly, just like a lot of teams in this country, had high aspirations and high expectations.

And while we feel like we fell short of one of those in winning a conference championship, certainly advancing in the NCAA Tournament was another goal priority.

So you just -- you try to embrace these moments because like where our game is at right now, we don't have two or three schools selling out arenas, we have tens and twenties of schools selling out arenas. And so if you can't get motivated to play in front of a sold-out crowd, I don't care where it is or who it's against, you really shouldn't put a Baylor uniform on anyway.

So I think it's that whole idea of kind of embracing the challenge and what it means, what it means for this program, what it means for them individually, and then what our goals have been all season long.

Q. You mentioned defending the three earlier. One of



the better teams in the country when it comes to that. What makes you guys so good in that regard, and do you feel like that will be kind of one of the keys to the game?

NICKI COLLEN: I think we're a -- we deny on pass-away. It's not something I'm giving up. Kenny is going to see it on film. We try to cover out. We're pretty true to our fundamentals and principles, and at the same time we play scouts really, really hard. We know who we can help off of and who we can't.

And you can see a reaction from the bench when we make mistakes. Which there's always game slippage, but our goal is to not let three-point shooters beat us from three and not let drivers beat us to the rim and be really good in terms of both our team defense and then guarding our yard.

And so I think athletically it's a strength of ours. I think we don't often get out-athleted. Sometimes we get size. We have size issues. But ultimately I think we can play out and cover the three-point line. And at times we're little at the one and two, but we have size everywhere else when it comes to the three-point line.

Q. When you look at yesterday's game, there was like ebbs and flows. I mean, it would get close, but then you guys would expand the lead. What's the biggest piece of advice you give your team when the game has those ebbs and flows where you're playing well but then maybe there's a stretch where you don't play well but then you turn it back on?

NICKI COLLEN: Usually we turn it over. That's what leads to those stretches. I think a lot of it is poise. I think when we share the basketball, when we're poised and we take care of it, when we give ourself opportunity to score, we can be pretty good.

And so I think when we had some of those ebbs and flows, it was turnovers that leads to advantages in terms of offensive transition and also opportunities to offensive rebound because you're kind of out of system.

And so we talk a lot about ball security. Maybe you can't always tell that from our stats, but it's something we really, really talk about. And I think there were moments, obviously in particular in the second quarter when they turned up their pressure and went man, and we had Sarah Andrews in foul trouble, we just -- we were in a situation where we didn't have the kid that takes care of the ball the best for us out on the floor.

And the same thing happened late in the game. You get

that lead, you want to rest key players, and then they start turning it up and trapping. And we didn't make the best decisions when they were kind of creating chaos, I would call it.

And so every opponent is different, and you've got to understand what that chaos can look like. Is it -- are they denying, where are they playing soft, who are they guarding.

I mean, when you look at our opponents, we're playing two very different opponents in terms of strengths. And so the ways that Virginia Tech is going to try to exploit us is very different than the ways Vandy was going to try to exploit us. So it's really understanding what those strengths and weaknesses are.

Q. I thought Bella was tremendous last night. Also was a great interview by the way after the game. What do you think enabled her to have that kind of breakout game, and what do you need from her tomorrow?

NICKI COLLEN: First of all, anytime Bella speaks you think she's in line to be the next President of the United States. So that does not surprise me that she was a great interview. Highly, highly intelligent kid.

I would tell you, I don't know if she would tell you, but I think we beat Virginia Tech out for her. They were one of the schools she took an official visit to, and I think she had a great relationship with Coach Brooks.

And I just think she was motivated for this moment. I thought she played a year ago in our comeback against Alabama in the first round, she was really, really good too.

So I think she's pretty fearless. I think when her first shot goes in, it gives her a ton of confidence. It really does. She really feeds off of that. Normally she's good for about two charges a game. So when she didn't get that call last night I was surprised because I think she's like at 27 charges on the season.

But I think she's an energy player. I really, really believe that her shot went in, the advantage she had size at that position, we kept her almost exclusively at the three last night. So she had a lot of size. I thought she got in the passing lane. I thought all around she was able to defensively make plays and then knock down open shots.

Q. Foster Pavilion, a pretty insane atmosphere, very similar to the one we'll see tomorrow. How do you think that has prepared you for this game and for the rest of March?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I think playing at Iowa State, you're always going to play in front of a huge crowd. Winning at Texas in front of 10,000. Like this isn't new to us. We played in Gampel last year in the second round with a bunch of freshmen.

So do I think this building is loud? Yes, this building is really, really loud. I think it's how it's built. It goes straight up. There's not a lot of bells and whistles, which sounds like maybe they're going to do some renovations here.

But ultimately I think the feel has an amazing collegiate feel because of the energy of the fans. The energy of the students was really good I thought yesterday.

And so I think it we're going to be playing against -- there's not going to be a lot of green and gold in the stands. So we're going to have to play really, really well and find ways to quiet the crowd, quite frankly.

Q. Sarah was up here a little bit ago, and obviously she's been one of the constants of this program for so long. How, for you, maybe both on and off the court, has her presence, her constant presence kind of helped you shape this into what it is right now?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah. I mean, constant, she's the only player. When we started this season, we didn't have anyone on our roster that had been at Baylor more than one year besides Sarah. And I think it's the nature of coaching changes and turnover and the portal and things like that. She was a part of a two-player class, and her classmate followed Kim to LSU when she went there.

So I think she's been able to be a little bit of the stabilizer. I feel like as our freshmen turn to sophomores and learned a little better what we do and why we do it, Sarah is still the one that does the best job of not just understanding the play but why we're running it, who we're running it for, and what we're looking for when we run it.

Which is always a huge part of teaching and coaching the game. It's not just run from A to B but like here's what they're doing, here's how we need to exploit the pin-down because we've got to slip it. Vandy was going to switch screens last night.

So she has a feels for that. She knows if people are locking and trailing her of a screen that she's going to have the drop pass if she sees the post player in front of her.

And we're still trying to get a lot of our younger players to our program or younger players in general just to read the screen to begin with. Are they going to shoot in the gap? Are they chasing you? What are you doing?

So I think for her, she's the one that can speak the best in a huddle when I'm not in it, when the coaches aren't in it, in terms of what we need to do.

I think Bella and Buggs have come a long way in particular in terms of they've played a ton of minutes. So even though they're sophomores, they've played a ton of minutes.

But I think that's who she is. Like she understands. She's going to get her degree this spring and has announced she's coming back. And just because she's been such talented player as well, her voice carries weight.

Q. You mentioned the coaching change. Obviously what's been the key for you, your approach in terms of keeping Baylor a nationally relevant program after taking over for Mulkey?

NICKI COLLEN: Being me. I'm probably unapologetically me. I love to talk about Xs and Os. I'm like a basketball nerd. I love to teach. I always say I coach basketball because I love the game and I love people, and it's the way to combine the two.

And so it's -- I'm not trying to be anybody but who I am. And our style isn't the same as Coach Mulkey's was. We still want to recruit great players. I think coaching in the pros -- I'm not saying -- like I think a lot of coaches have a lot of different advantages in the recruiting game, but a lot of the top players want to be pros.

And to me, I know what a pro looks like. I know what it takes to not just get to the pros but stay in the pros.

And so I think that's a little bit of who we are, but at the same time, like not everyone that comes to Baylor is going to be a pro. But you're going to learn the game. You're going to grow in the game. You're going to get a great education. We're going to really focus on that piece of it too.

And this world that we're in now of NIL and everything else, we don't want to lose the student part of student-athlete.

And so we're not afraid to talk about it. We're not afraid to be unapologetically ourselves in terms of our faith at Baylor.

And so it's just this kind of really cool marriage of the special component, the basketball component, the athlete component.

Q. You guys had a quick turnaround in terms of



finding out who your first round opponent would be with Vanderbilt. I know there was probably some scouting you could have done on both teams ahead of time. But does that help when you have another quick turnaround like this that your players and you already had to go through this once and you as a staff already had to try to have a short timeline to say this is who we're facing, this is what we're going to do?

NICKI COLLEN: It is. It helps. You're coming off your conference tournament when you're already doing that.

But I also think the beauty of being in this situations and in particular playing here and playing against Virginia Tech and our players having seen them play in the Final Four last year and having those aspirations, like we don't have to sell them on how good this opponent is. They don't need motivation. We don't have to sell them a line to get them to be motivated to play in this environment, to play this team.

And so I think they had a lot of respect for Vanderbilt and have a ton of respect for Virginia Tech and not just what they did last year but what they've done this year.

So I think it's -- we have pride in our -- who Baylor is but also in our league, and it's another opportunity to play a really, really talented Power Five team out of the ACC.

I think that's the biggest thing. Like we have their ear because for us to get where we want to go and where they want to go, we have to be really dialed into scouting report and getting stuff done in a short period of time.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach, for being here.

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