

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

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

Baylor Lady Bears

Head Coach Nicki Collen

Jada Walker

Sarah Andrews

Media Conference

Baylor 75, Virginia Tech 72

THE MODERATOR: Let's open with an opening statement from Head Coach Nicki Collen.

NICKI COLLEN: Definitely not surprised that you had two teams, a 4 and a 5 seed that were so closely matched. I think when you look at the stats, you can really see how closely matched. They made more threes. We made more free-throws.

I just thought it was a competitive game. Nobody got out with more than about a six- or eight-point lead, and I just thought these guys battled.

Amazing environment. Fans were amazing. Really amazing. I thought their execution late, the threes that Amooore hit both off the glass and that last one were pretty incredible and speak to how talented she is, but I thought these guys led us today.

Obviously Jada did it in the second half, and Sarah really did it in the first half. I thought Sarah really kept us comfortable when Jada was in foul trouble, and then obviously Jada was unbelievable down the stretch.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. What was the mindset going into the last 20 seconds when Virginia Tech cut it a little bit closer, and you guys had to lock down down the stretch?

JADA WALKER: Really just to take care of the ball down the stretch. We did a good play that got me open and got



the and-one, but just taking care of the ball and not giving up threes. I know she got one off, but it was a tough one. That happens in March. I'm glad we got to pull off the win.

Q. Coach Collen, your team hit some big free-throws in the fourth quarter. Do you think the slow start in the first quarter was because of the environment, or was it just nerves?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I don't know that we got off to that slow of start. I mean, we missed some free-throws, but I thought it was super competitive. I thought --

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes only.

Q. Jada, you played absolutely out of your mind. You seemed to really frustrate Virginia Tech in just about every facet of your game. What's going through your head as the game progresses and you are just continuously making shot after shot and frustrating Tech as much as you were?

JADA WALKER: Really just one play at a time. It was working for me down the stretch. I was hitting shots, and I'm glad I was because I haven't been earlier on in the season, but now it's crunch time.

You have to hit shots in order for us to win. I did. Sarah did. A lot of our teammates did, and we got stops down the stretch that helped us.

Q. What does it mean to get to the Sweet 16 and playing games here in your home state?

JADA WALKER: It means a lot. I was not leaving Virginia with a loss so, I'm glad we got to get a W, and we get to go back to Waco and game plan and get ready for the Sweet 16.

Q. Jada, you did a pretty nifty job of dribbling there with 12 seconds to go (indiscernible) and six seconds before they fouled you. What was going through your mind during that time, and can you talk about your team's defense with 1.3 seconds to go after they



inbounded it?

JADA WALKER: Practice this past week that we had coming here, we really worked on end-of-game situations, and that's a play that we ran. I'm glad it worked and we got to score.

Really our defense was on point. We knew where shooters were. They did hit tough shots, but like I said again, that happens. I feel like Sarah did a phenomenal job on the shooters, getting over screens. Bella was blocking shots from everywhere. I feel like we all were just on point all over the floor today.

Q. (Off microphone).

JADA WALKER: I like to play tag in practice. I just run around and try to dodge everybody before the time runs out. I'm a pretty good ball handler, so...

Q. Sarah, has Jada been kind of building up to kind of a second half performance like this? Have you seen this from her before this game?

SARAH ANDREWS: Oh, yeah. I think I saw it at the beginning of the year, Texas. I could go on and on.

I'm just super proud of Jada. She was frustrated at first a little bit. They were calling the game kind of close at the beginning. She picked up two early ones.

The way she came out in the second half, I was, like, Jada, you're built for this. This is moment you've been waiting for. I'm super proud of her for fighting through it.

Q. In a game like this where it seems like the referees -- if it's even a borderline close to a foul that they're going to call the foul, what's the strategy that kind of goes through your head in a game like that?

SARAH ANDREWS: You got to make adjustments. You got to see the way that they're calling the game. You got to adjust to it. We saw that they were calling fouls, and we started attacking downhill. We got some of the same calls, so you just have to make adjustments. You can't control the whistle. You just have to play.

Q. Sarah, again, Coach Collen mentioned your first half. I guess how important was it for you personally to kind of start strong and kind of find your shot?

SARAH ANDREWS: That was like I felt like really almost the first time that I've seen the ball go through the hoop like that. I think I played at all levels. I finished at the rim.

Going to be better at free-throws, but overall I think me and Jada put together two halves. I was, like, Jada, I got the first half, and now it's your turn.

This team, I think everybody did a phenomenal job. We never got down. We stuck together even when they went on runs, and we just fed off the crowd energy. Playing in a gym like this, you got to feed off their energy. We got to silence them, so it was a fun game.

Q. Sarah, you played on this team back in 2021 when you beat Virginia Tech in the second round to go to the Sweet 16. Now as a leader of this team, how are you able to lead in that locker room showing, Hey, I know what it takes to advance past the first weekend?

SARAH ANDREWS: Just honestly when they went on runs, just hearing my voice and telling the team, Hey, we're fine. They're a great team. We never not expected them to go on runs. We knew they were going to make threes. They have great players.

But us sticking together and communicating is something we did very well tonight. We took coaching. I was, like, Hey, we're fine. We've been here before. Let's just stick together and come up with a W.

Q. You guys held Virginia Tech to 32 percent from three-point range. Obviously that's a strength of your guys', your perimeter defense. What was clicking for you guys to contain them so well?

JADA WALKER: We've been practicing this all week, like I said. Chasing people around screens, getting around screens however we can. If we had to switch, Coach Tony was, like, Switch everything, don't let them get an open shot off. If they hit your hand, okay, that's going to happen, but at the end of the day we did what we had to do to stop them from hitting as many threes as winning.

Q. Jada, do you get nervous? Some of those free-throws at the very end there, the crowd is going crazy, and they didn't hit the rim. What is going through your mind? Are you just blacked out at that point? Do you get nervous?

JADA WALKER: A little, but like Sarah told me all throughout the game, I'm made for those moments, and that really gave me confidence to step up there and knock them down and just clear out the noise.

We're going to be at home. We're going to be away sometimes. So really just playing through that, playing through the refs, playing through whatever you have to play through to win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. Let's open it up to questions for Coach Collen.

Q. First time for you at Baylor to go to the Sweet 16. How much do you think personally you needed this win?

NICKI COLLEN: First of all, I haven't been here that long. You made me feel like I'd been there ten years. It felt good.

I think knowing we were so close to hosting, you had to kind of get over that, but then you had to embrace this opportunity. I thought we had the pieces to be really effective against them, and I didn't think we got off to a slow start when you look at we scored 21 points in that first quarter.

I thought Sarah helped us be really, really comfortable. I thought we got downhill early, got some layups, scored around the rim off our out of bounds plays. So we got some easy ones. I thought we missed some easy ones.

I thought had we made free-throws, we could have created more separation. That was probably my biggest frustration. Dre is a really good free-throw shooter. Sarah is a really good free-throw shooter.

It just feels good to celebrate with that group of girls. We started this journey in July, really summer school. When we went overseas and played, it was all about building camaraderie to get to this point to win these close games.

When Georgia's shot banked -- when you play great defense, and it banks in, you are, like, No, no, no, that's not fair. It's really not fair. I thought we did a good job.

I thought in particular I didn't make a lot of play calls. It should have been obvious. Like, we were going to get Sarah and we were going to get Jada in ball screens and make them guard us in ball screens.

We felt like we could really attack in particular their fives in ball screens, and I thought we did a good job of that picking up some fouls on Strack. I thought we stayed composed. I know everyone thinks I was a little uncomposed, but the reality was I was just frustrated with the lack of information. I'll call it that. Lack of information, you know?

We had about 17 clock errors and things like that that all of a sudden that's frustrating. That doesn't usually happen when people are out of time-outs. I think from that perspective I just wanted it bad, but I didn't want it for me.

It's never been about me at Baylor. It's about these players. It's about this program. It's about competing at a high level.

I've never feared coaching in a big moment. Kenny Brooks is an amazing play caller. Amazing play caller. You do fear a one-possession game against him because he is a talented, talented play caller, but I thought our girls did a good job even down to taking the foul late when we had a foul to give.

Q. Yesterday you talked about how this isn't your team playing against five people. This is your team playing against 10,005 people. Can you just elaborate on how much the crowd affected you? Then just a second question, you kind of already alluded to it, it seemed like you were very energetic when it came to talking to the refs. Can you just kind of elaborate more so on kind of what's going that conversation and kind of just how that was going?

NICKI COLLEN: I think there's multiple questions there, obviously. I think the first one, I don't know if Jada was nervous or not, but that's about as loud I believe in her life that she's ever had to shoot a free-throw there at the end of the game when it was a one-point game to make it a three-point game. This place of roaring. Every time they would hit a three, the place would absolutely erupt. Absolutely erupt.

So I think you always feel like you have to be at least ten points better on the road. I think crowds affect officials. They're human. I firmly believe that. I think officials are human, and the energy of the game, and I firmly believe that was an intentional foul. I know you don't want to call that late in a game, but that was my belief that she wrapped her up when she got around her.

When it feels like a dangerous play, yeah, I'm going to battle for my kid because I think that's the right play in that situation. I think that's a tough thing, of course, but you get to the NCAA Tournament, and all of a sudden every time we put our hands -- both ways, okay, both ways, but it was 5-0 to start the game three minutes into the game on fouls.

My point guard, who had 28 points in 26 minutes, was sitting on the bench. I think anyone -- I'm pretty sure Kenny would be frustrated if his point guard was sitting on the bench. I think from that perspective it's a consistency of calls is all you want. Then you want communication.

I think those are three really good officials. I've had all of them. I think when it's really loud in there and you can't communicate with them, I think that's can be frustrating.

I think the game -- we obviously shot more free-throws because we're a team that attacks the basket more. That's a great three-point shooting team, and they want to drive it and spray it out to three-point shooters. So we knew our advantage was getting to the rim and drawing fouls.

When the game was called really tick-tack at the beginning, that's frustrating when you are trying to play an aggressive style defense.

Q. Were you surprised that Jada had a performance like that in her?

NICKI COLLEN: It's crazy. She's had an unbelievable week of practice. When we went back to kind of the drawing board between the Big 12 Tournament and the NCAA announcement, we just spent hours getting shots up. Very little practice time and hours getting shots up because when we were really good early in the season, our defense was good, but our offense was top ten in the country and sharing the ball and shooting threes and all that. I just felt like we had lost some of our confidence.

I think for Jada when you looked at when we were 14-0 and you compared that to when we were 10-7, and some of it's level of competition, but included in that was Utah and Texas and Miami and a lot of really good teams, and so she had gotten really frustrated with our inability to make open threes.

We told her, Take your jump shot, your jump shot is a layup, your jump shot is a layup. Mix in playing off the bounce, getting 15 feet. So she's just had really good practices dialed into getting to her jump shot.

So I just thought when she made one, then it was two. They kept backing up on her because she's so slippery if you come up on her, she's going to cross you up and get to the rim. So I thought she did an unbelievable job playing against an All-American point guard.

Q. Can you talk about your defense when they inbounded the ball with 1.3 seconds to go? What do you feel helped you make it so tough for them to get a shot off?

NICKI COLLEN: I think we got a piece, which obviously helps. We were switching everything. Certainly when it was .8, it's a totally different than really 1.8. 1.8 you can get a dribble. From that perspective I think both teams being out of time-outs I think in that scenario we wanted to switch everything out and contest without fouling.

You question. You hit a point. Every coach has a philosophy of whether you foul in that situation, whether

you don't, but not under three seconds because most of the time the person that catches the ball is going to be moving towards the basket rather than away from the basket.

We just wanted to play high hands, and we got a piece of it. Ultimately I don't know who it was supposed to go to because the ball got tipped.

Q. You gave Virginia Tech their first home loss since 2022. What kind of goes into your players showcasing that level of togetherness that they did down the stretch to pull off a feat like that?

NICKI COLLEN: We went into Texas and beat Texas the last two years. We played Iowa State close in front of 10,000 fans. We don't do it game in and game out, but I don't think -- if you look at our schedule and how we've performed on the road against top-25 teams, we've got a lot of kids that live for these moments, that really enjoy these environments.

I do too. You don't spend five years in the pros and not get used to playing in close games and time and score and advance and time-outs and using them and utilizing them and running good plays. I think I'm at my happiest when I'm in a competitive game.

When we're up big and I'm managing minutes and trying to figure out who to get shots for, that's way more stressful for me than a one-possession game because you're trying to keep too many kids happy in that situation, and in this situation you're focused on one thing and one thing only, getting stops and putting the ball in the basket and how you do it.

I just think we've got a group of competitors. Bella and Buggs got to play at UConn last year, and we played them really well for two and a half quarters, and they were freshmen. So I think we've got a lot of players that just love this environment.

There's nothing much better than being a kid that hits a shot and silences a crowd when they're roaring. It's almost better than making a shot at home and someone cheering for you. It's the silencing that if you are a competitor is way better.

Q. We've talked about it all week. This team doesn't necessarily have an All-American. Bella goes off first game, and now it's Jada's game. How much of an asset do you think that could be, that quality of your team could be, for this team throughout the rest of the tournament?

NICKI COLLEN: I think it comes down to I'm just grateful for the kids that believed in me and chose Baylor. Every kid on this team chose Baylor, and they chose me, including Sarah because Sarah chose to stay when she could have gone anywhere.

I think what Sarah wouldn't tell you, she didn't impact the game a whole lot her freshman year when she played against Virginia Tech, but she was a difference-maker tonight.

I am just excited to play the mismatches. At the end of the day my job is to put them in positions to be successful, and tonight it was getting Jada in as many ball screens as I could get her in in the second half.

So I think that's the uniqueness about our team. As the game is unfolding, it's how do I get shots for particular players? Against Vanderbilt it was Bella. Let's swing it and kick it out.

I think our defense was -- we probably made about five really bad defensive mistakes tonight. Things that they knew they put their hand up immediately and was, like, I'm not supposed to do that, I'm not supposed to help on the drive because they want to throw the drift. If you take those plays away, our competitive spirit all night was amazing. So I think they know.

I'm really careful to say this the right way because we may not have a First Team All-Conference player on our team. We may not have an All-American on our team, but that doesn't mean we don't have great players. I think it's really important because I remember my first year in the WNBA, we had no Olympians, and it was an Olympic year, and it was so offensive to our players to hear we have no Olympians. Like, what are we?

I'm always really careful to get them to understand that any of these guys could be stars on other teams, but it's about their selflessness to get the ball to the most open person. When you see 12 teammates chanting, "Jada" after the game, that's what you want. You don't want them to be frustrated that they were 0 for 5. You want them to be happy for the kid that made the and-one, that made the big play late.

I think it makes you hard to guard at times because we can move the ball, and a lot of people can score the basketball, and you can't key in on one person. That was a long answer, but thanks for letting me go on.

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