

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Portland vs Kansas State

Friday, March 22, 2024

Manhattan, Kansas, USA

Bramlage Coliseum

Kansas State Wildcats

Jeff Mittie

Gabby Gregory

Ayoka Lee

Media Conference

Kansas State - 78, Portland - 65

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

JEFF MITTIE: I thought our players were playing extremely well. I thought the ball was moving. I thought we were getting the ball to some really, really good spots of the floor. I certainly liked our start and I liked a lot of things we were doing. I think we needed a game like this. To get just kind of the nerves and all that out of the first game, I think you needed to get a tough game like this, and Portland certainly we couldn't run away from 'em. Every time we extended it out, they made plays. They got to the free-throw line. They did some things too.

One of the things with them is that because they put so much in the full court press, you put 'em to the free-throw line, they have that opportunity to get in it way more. So I was proud of my group. I thought we battled through some foul trouble and battled through some things, but good to get off on the right foot and good to be sitting here advancing on.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For both of you, if you could speak on the environment in Bramlage today. It maybe wasn't a sellout, but it sure felt like it, but I guess your thoughts on the environment today.

GABBY GREGORY: Obviously I was really trying for that sellout, but we were really close. I mean, it was amazing in



there. Like, right when we came out to shoot our layups like right before tip, I mean, I was just -- had a huge smile on my face because that is the crowd that we want to play in. I mean, I think it really just speaks to the growth of the game of women's basketball, that we get to play in front of almost sold out crowds and things like that now. But I think it was tremendous and I can't wait to have a sellout on Sunday.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think Gabby said it great. It was really great to play in front of that many people, that many students. Yeah, I think we didn't sell out today, but Sunday's just another opportunity to do that, and I think, I don't know, you're silly if you're not buying tickets, so, yeah.

Q. Gabby, this was the best scoring game that you've had since the end of last season. How was it feeling out there for you?

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think I just shooting the ball and then just it was going in. That's really all there is to it. My teammates have a lot of trust in me. I know Coach Mittie has a lot of trust in me. So I just tried to be as confident as I can be and when it's my turn, then just step up and knock it down.

Q. For both players, to go back to the environment for a second, did you guys get some juice from that? Did you think that had anything to do with the good start that you all had?

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think definitely in that first quarter, I mean, I think there's a some people on the team that they play with a lot of emotion, myself, but there's some people on the team that don't really do that, but we saw some of that today, Serena, Jaelyn, and I think that that crowd is what is creating that. I think that's very, very helpful for our team.

Coach Mittie always says, like, next play mentality. I think when we have a great crowd like that and they're into the game, it makes it easier for whenever we do make a mistake to go to the next play because we have such a huge support from the crowd.



AYOKA LEE: Yeah, absolutely. I think as teammates, we want to pull one another up, lift each other up, and I think the crowd just adds to that. Like, so many plays, like Zy hitting a mid-range, Gabby hitting a three, and you hear the crowd go crazy. They just stayed in the game with us, especially down the stretch. So, yeah, I think it definitely adds to the environment and, yeah, it gives us some extra juice.

Q. Both of you, 46 total fouls, probably that many more that could have been called that weren't. How physical was that game?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, it was physical, but I think we're used to physicality. I don't think it was anything we hadn't seen before. Down the stretch it just came down to us being smart.

GABBY GREGORY: When our last game was against Texas, I mean, we're used to that. I think playing in the Big-12, it prepares you to play against very physical teams. So, yeah, that was just another game of physicality.

Q. Talk about the fast start, how much that helped. You were up by 20 midway through the second quarter. Talk about how much that helped you for the rest of the day.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think it definitely helped us, especially when we had stretches where we weren't executing as well as we wanted on defense, and not building our wall as well as we wanted to. So, yeah, I think it just comes down -- I mean, our hope is to keep that lead and we didn't get that done tonight, but I think it just goes back to continuing to work regardless of the lead we have, regardless of the score.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think we played incredible coming out at the start of the game, but now it's just how can we extend that longer moving forward. But, yeah, it was a great start by us.

Q. How cool was it playing a team outside of the Big-12 finally again?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, it's funny you put it that way. It's been so long. Yeah, it's fun to scout a team that you haven't seen before that's in a whole different conference. It can be refreshing, I think, and I think we did a good job of, yeah, scouting and executing well on defense and offense. So, yeah, it feels good. Yeah, it's refreshing.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think it's fun, especially when you've been playing for like a hundred years, like me and

Yoky. You get to the teams in the Big-12 and you know every single person by their first and last name, you know exactly how they play and everything like that. So I think it's fun when you do go and you play a brand-new team and you have no idea who these people are. It's just part of the fun of basketball, so, yeah.

Q. Playing off the kind of having played for a long time, for both of you, do you feel like that experience has really helped you, especially in the second half where Portland kind of tried to make a bit of a run and get back into the game? Did your experience help to kind of keep you composed in that stretch?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think so. I think we both play with a lot of energy, but I think what our experience really helps us with is like our poise and really regrouping our team and, like, just getting back to like the core of what we need to be doing. So, yeah, I think it helps personally.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, I think Yoky and myself are very good vocal leaders, so we're able to talk to our teammates and let them know things throughout the game, things that we're seeing. And then like she said, just our poise. We've been in tight games many many times, played in front of crowds and things like that, so we just try to use our experience that we have and maybe pass that down to the younger kids on our team.

Q. For both of you, a lot was made of their turning people over and yet I think you guys won the turnover battle but with a different style. How good was your half-court defense? It seemed like you didn't give them a lot of open looks.

GABBY GREGORY: At times (laughing). We were really trying to focus on no backdoors. I mean, they're just a really good team. They run a lot of really good stuff and they played really, really hard, so they definitely gave us some problems, but we have a lot that we can learn from that game defensively, especially.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think our guards did a really good job of just like having active hands, especially when there were like fumbles or loose balls the majority of the game. So, yeah, we knew going into the game that they were going to force turnovers, but we also knew that we could do the same thing. So I think we did a good job doing that.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. On the environment and how much that may have played into your fast start.

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I think it could go one of two ways, you could come out a little bit tight or you could come out energized and I think we saw our group was excited to play. I thought we played at a faster pace in that first quarter. The game got bogged down after that. It got bogged down with a lot of whistles. Portland likes to kind of junk it up defensively and you combine that with the whistles, there wasn't much flow after that. First quarter, there was a lot of flow and we played really well in that quarter.

So I thought the crowd was fantastic. I would echo the same thing the players said, is that it's great to walk out there and have people there early, have people when you get out. We know even at 3:30 on a Friday, that that's not easy to do, so we don't take it for granted. We're fortunate here. We've had good crowds all year, but it was a special crowd and the students were great as usual.

Q. Gabby talked about the fact of great start, but then you got to learn how to extend it. With just one day turnaround, how do you teach them, how do you help them extend that start to carry through the whole game on Sunday?

JEFF MITTIE: I think our bench has got to continue to give us more consistency. They were inconsistent. We had some turnovers. Even at the end of the third when I'm trying to rest a couple people, we had turnovers, gave 'em four points. So more consistent. That's not easy to do coming off the bench when the game is chaotic and the game is not -- you're not going to -- it's not easy to do in a game like that because you're not coming in getting into the flow of the game. You hear that constantly, well, just come off the bench, get into the flow. There wasn't any flow. Not much. So that wasn't easy on them.

But I think that would certainly help. I think for some of them, this was their first experience, so it was good to get 'em on the floor and I think they will benefit going forward.

Q. You dissected that press in that first quarter, and you mentioned the game got kind of junked up there, but did they change something about their press or did you just not handle it quite as well after that?

JEFF MITTIE: I thought we got -- I didn't see any significant changes in them. I think what we did, is -- you know, the press has a tendency to wear on you and if a player takes off or a player gets fatigued out there and they're supposed to fill a gap, maybe that timing's off, and I think that happened to us.

I do think that when we rotated players in, they were coming into a game that was pretty chaotic and they didn't

settle into that chaos very well.

Q. Gabby's been inconsistent, I guess, offensively this season, but how big was it to have a veteran come up in a game like this, especially in that fourth quarter when she had nine points, I think?

JEFF MITTIE: I think she's had a good look to her the last five, six games. The ball's really -- she's had a good look to her. She made a lot of right plays today when we needed 'em. We wanted to get in the middle of the floor and you go back on film, you're going to see her get to the middle of the floor. She got to the free-throw line there, she got the ball to Lee, and then she was able to settle in after she missed her first early threes. I think she missed her first threes. But she's one that, like it or not, she thinks every shot's going in. She has that confidence and I feel like she's got a good look to her right now.

Q. Second half, Portland shot over 50 percent. Was there anything they changed offensively to be more efficient?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I didn't think we were very good defensively in the second half. I thought they drove us, I thought they got us too deep, they got us in some one-on-one postups down low, and it wasn't just posting up where you had to enter it, they dribbled to the post, and we've got to be more physical out front.

I do think our guards got hesitant. We had guards out there with three fouls, four fouls, and they didn't want to pick up another one. I thought Portland took advantage of that.

Stylistically, we don't face a lot of teams like Portland where they're drawing Lee away from the basket. Big-12's got more traditional posts. We knew that that was going to be a little bit of a challenge. I just think we needed to be more physical, not down low, we needed to be more physical on the perimeter and not let them get as deep as they did.

Q. How nice is it that after this next game is over, you and your staff only just have a two-minute walk back to your offices to start preparing for Sunday, instead of doing this in a hotel room or something like that?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, they keep telling us we're not allowed to use the offices much, so we have to use off-site stuff or something like that. So I don't know. It's nice to have a five-minute walk to our site, our site. So, yeah, it's nice to be at home. It's nice to be able to quickly share the victories with family and it will be nice to get back to work here as soon as I'm done talking to you guys.

Q. Could you just speak to the challenges that Portland presented today and maybe how your team overcame some of those stylistic changes you kind of touched on a few minutes ago?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I'll just go back to the chaos. The best I can compare 'em to is that they play a little bit like West Virginia and Texas in terms of the press, then they go back into the zone. So they're not going to give you many single postups with Lee. And then I'll just go back to the game got very bogged down. There wasn't much flow to it. When the game had flow to it, we played very well.

But what could we learn from it? Well, this time of the year you take some commonalities that your next opponent might face, but there might not be very many, so you go to the next game, you go to the next scout, you do what you can do better. I think that we got to correct -- when they made their run, regardless of who we play, I did not like our discipline on the back doors, and on out of bounds plays, we had some players fall asleep on some pretty simple things. We've got to correct those things. But having said all that, I think that we needed a game like this. I do. I think we needed a game that we were under duress. I think we needed a game where we had to handle some chaos, handle some shot clock things, and I think we got a good test and that will benefit us going forward.

Q. Curious about not being able to use your office. I imagine that's part of the neutralizing of the event and what other things, examples are there like that?

JEFF MITTIE: Well we're allowed to use it, I guess we're allowed to use it a little bit, but they do try to make it as neutral as you can, right. So, the commonalities or the areas that training rooms all need to be here. So we don't use our Ice basketball facility for that. If you schedule an auxiliary practice, every team here can use Ice facility. So that, from that standpoint, that's pretty normal. But there are some things that they do make everything neutral. You noticed it in the Arena. The arena's situated differently as well. So I said before the tournament that you play all year for it to be different, and the different is good. I would agree with that. You play all year to earn the right for this time of the year to be special, this time of the year to be different, and so we're enjoying that.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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