

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Tennessee vs NC State

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

Tennessee Lady Volunteers Coach Kellie Harper

Jasmine Powell

Tamari Key

Media Conference

Q. Tamari, how has it been to be back home and especially after all you've been through to be able to play in the second round in front with your team and in front of your hometown fans?

TAMARI KEY: I think it's definitely full circle for me. Like you said, to be able to come home, play in front of people that I haven't seen in a while that haven't been able to get out to Knoxville to see me play -- teachers, trainers, my mom's side of the family -- everybody had came in and rallied behind us for us to push through to get to the second round.

Q. Tamari, obviously your sister plays for Carolina, and she's down in Columbia. Have you been privy to some of the family texts in terms of figuring out logistics to get everyone where they need to be, both of you all?

TAMARI KEY: When I went home in the summer, my mom had an Excel spreadsheet of all the games once both of our schedules came out where she was going to go, hotels and the whole nine. So I think she's been to, like, 43 games this season between the two of us and counting.

So I know she gets really excited about that. Her being able to work remote lets her travel all over to watch us play. That means a lot for the both of us.

Q. What's your favorite part about playing with Rickea?

JASMINE POWELL: I would just say that her being a competitor is really the best thing about Kea. She works



extremely hard. She has a great work ethic. She wants to win every possession.

And playing with someone like that, you never have to worry if they're going to go hard, you don't have to worry about do they want to win. You don't have to worry about any of that. I think that's the best thing about Kea.

Q. Jasmine, you're the point guard. In this game tomorrow, what's your biggest concern, you handle the ball the majority of the time for your team, what is your biggest concern going into tomorrow's game -- tempo, turnovers? Expound on that if you can.

JASMINE POWELL: One thing we know about NC State is they play really good defense. They want to kind of keep you out of the paint. That's where we like to play is in the paint.

So I wouldn't say that's a concern for me. I think we really have a good game plan going in. And we're really going to be locked in and focused. I wouldn't say it's a big concern. But I do know that's how they like to play. And that's one of our strengths for us.

Q. Tamari, how rewarding has it been for you to get a full season in? And were you ever concerned that your career was over last season?

TAMARI KEY: I think it was scary at the time. It was just the unknown of what my next steps were, once I got diagnosed. But just knowing I had a good crew with us, my teammates were really supportive.

Our doctors and my strength coaches, my coaches have been supportive through all of that. So they just knew once I could get back on the court and start playing again, they had a game plan for me and a timeline for me. So we just kind of took it one day at a time.

Q. Tamari, so many people find so much inspiration in your story. What have you learned about yourself?

TAMARI KEY: That I'm not patient, I think. (Laughter). It was hard sitting out patiently waiting to be able to get



cleared and play again. But it was also hard trying to get back into the swing of things as well.

Obviously I would choose this hard a million times over again. But I think both processes taught me patience, taking it one day at a time, one practice at a time. I wasn't going to get it all back in a day or two or a game or two. I think that's the biggest thing.

Q. Tamari, how did you make it out of Raleigh? I'm just wondering. I live not too far from Cary High School, and you're right here in ACC country. Did they recruit you? Did you just want to leave the state of North Carolina? What was the situation with that?

TAMARI KEY: I played UIBO (phonetic), I think getting in a circuit where they put me in front of a lot of different colleges and universities all over the country. I think that helped me get out more.

Also, I think I just grew up coming to these games. I mean probably came to the first one when I was in fourth or fifth grade, between UNC, Duke and NC State. So I think it just all came down to when I got older kind of what I was looking for. I kind of could figure out myself a little more, what I wanted for myself in the future. And Tennessee aligned perfectly with that.

Q. There are a lot of new eyes on women's basketball right now. Things are really rising. But there's also a lot of wonderful history in this sport. Growing up, what are some of your favorite memories? You mentioned coming to these games here. Do you have any specific players that you loved watching or specific memories? I don't know, maybe any Volunteers also that you loved watching growing up?

JASMINE POWELL: Honestly, when you talk about Vols or Lady Vols I liked to watch when I was growing up and I finally getting into basketball I was always watching Meighan Simmons. Her track record at Tennessee is amazing, being player of the year twice.

She was a speedy guard just like me. So looking at her -- back then, they were wearing huge jerseys, so it looked like she was going way faster than she was. (Laughter). But I always admired how fast she went. Kind of like aligned my play with hers. That's really where I fell in love with the game of basketball is watching her and going to Final Fours.

TAMARI KEY: I think for me more so I just loved watching basketball. Like you said, growing up in the ACC, I watched all the games -- SEC, ACC, Big Ten.

I just liked watching good basketball. I don't have any really specific players. Obviously we have Candace and Tamika and Chamique, the G.O.A.T.s. And when we get time we go back and look at the amazing things they did at Tennessee. But for me I was just kind of all over the place.

Q. Tamari, thinking back to when Jasmine transferred in, what were your initial impressions what she brought to the team and what's it been like playing with her?

TAMARI KEY: My first impression of her off the court is she's hilarious. She's one of the funniest people on the team. I think the whole visit we were cracking jokes as soon as she stepped on campus.

But also that she's a competitor. She was really good at making reads on the offensive end. And you know she's going to have your back on both ends of the court. She's a good communicator. She's one of the leaders on the court. No matter the highs and the lows of the game, she stays poised and keeps everyone else poised as well.

Q. Jasmine, you've been at Tennessee two years. Last year you got to play the second round on your home court. Now, of course, you're in Raleigh. I know capacity is 7,000, but everyone says it is very loud there, probably with the lower ceiling. Do you think it has helped Tennessee that you've played in some very hostile environments at South Carolina and in Greenville, which was essentially a South Carolina home game, going into this game? I don't think this is a team that's going to be intimidated by noise.

JASMINE POWELL: I definitely think it helps that we played in such environments that you kind of talked about. But even when we were at the game watching NC State play Chattanooga, it was extremely loud in there. The seats were full. I don't think you saw any empty seats. But we're used to playing in that environment.

And any environment we play in, we lean on each other and the coaching staff. We know no matter where we go, whether we're on our home court or not, we have each other; we play for each other. I don't think that the fans or anything else is going to be an issue.

Q. Tamari, your mother is all over social media, TV, newspapers, March Madness, Twitter account is now calling her the real MVP. Is she becoming more famous in her children, and is she going to be a little unbearable here for a while?

TAMARI KEY: Perfect example of this, yesterday after the game, I obviously had a lot of family here. So I was with

them after the game. I kept calling my mom, and she finally called me back. I'm like, where are you? I'm waiting for you. She said, oh, I'm sorry, I had an interview, but I'll be over there in a few minutes. I said, okay, yeah. So whenever you get a chance, I'm here waiting for you. (Laughter).

It's something that me and my sister, we grew up with her being at all of our games. I think for her to get the recognition that she's getting on social media, I mean in the interviews, the news articles, she's through the moon with all that.

THE MODERATOR: At this time we'll start with Coach Harper.

Q. Wes Moore was talking all about your relationship and how far back you go and how much your friendship means to him. What is it like for you to be facing him in such a big moment?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, we've coached against each other before, but obviously not in the NCAA Tournament. And it's fun, but it's not, both.

It's somebody that we pull for when we're not playing them and somebody that I respect a lot and appreciated his friendship throughout the years.

I know when the ball goes up, he's locked in on what he's doing. Same for us, we're locked in and we're going to do the best we can to get the win and advance.

Q. He's been sharing a lot of stories about you guys.

KELLIE HARPER: I'm so scared (laughter).

Q. One was about how he got you to come to Chattanooga from Auburn. I was wondering if you could share your side of the story of how he got you to leave Auburn and go coach with him at Chattanooga?

KELLIE HARPER: Wes is a really good recruiter. He's always been a really good recruiter. In that moment, I was thinking about my next steps, and he happens to call. And he's talking to me about his job, but obviously he knows that at this point I'm young, very young, but I'm also married, and we were talking through kind of what he saw for me at Chattanooga.

I'll never forget, he said, so what does your husband do? I said, well, he wants to coach some day. At that point he had gotten out of high school teaching/coaching. He was working at a golf course. And I told him that. I think the next phone call, he said, I might have another spot

available, and that was the first time that Jon and I ever worked together was with Wes.

Q. To continue the Wes questions --

KELLIE HARPER: It's fine.

Q. -- I think Wes has this persona that he seems to have when he talks with media, when he kind of has the camera in front of him. He seems like he's very fun, lovable type of person. Is that truly who he is? Who is the Wes Moore that you know?

KELLIE HARPER: He's funny. Most of the time Wes is that person. He loves lunch (laughter) -- no salad dressing, extra cheese on his salad, unsweet tea. He's going to change his order 30 times. You hate it for the waitress.

Wes is always complaining about something in a great way that only Wes can do.

I'll tell you a great story of him. Wes also doesn't like to pay full price for a lot of things. So when I first started working with him at Chattanooga, I was under 25. So you can't rent a car without extra fees under 25. So he was not going to let me rent a car to go recruiting.

He rented the car and I rode shotgun, which typically doesn't happen. For assistant coaches you don't usually do that. But we were in Orlando, and this is prior to GPS, prior to cell phones. So we were reading maps. So I'm in the front seat reading the map.

Has anybody in here ever ridden with Wes in the car? You would understand. And so it was perfect because I could read it and say, I think we've gotta go here -- and we were going to get off no matter how late that decision was made.

We were a pretty good match from the first moment we worked together, for a lot of reasons.

He is fun to be around. He really is. He's very competitive. And I think he takes a lot of things to heart, especially when it comes to his teams.

Q. He told the exact same story.

KELLIE HARPER: So I got it?

Q. Exactly. You spoke about how Wes gave you and Jon your start together as coaches. What is it like coaching with your husband? And what are the upsides and some of the challenges?

KELLIE HARPER: We've done this so long, I haven't answered this question in years. I think some of the benefits -- I don't go home after a tough loss or even a tough practice and my spouse puts his arm around me and says, it's okay, honey. It's not okay. He gets it.

So having somebody that really truly understands what we're going through or what I'm going through each and every day, I think it's been beneficial.

For many years, 14, to be exact, we coached together, or I should say we coached 12 years of the first 14 years of our marriage without children. And I think for us the team was our family. We really embraced that life. And you could really pour into our team.

We still do, but now we just have our own two with us. That makes things challenging. When I'm busy, he's busy. It makes it difficult to balance being parents and coaches that are coaching together. I think that's one of our biggest challenges, to be honest with you.

People think that we go home and we talk about it 24/7. We don't. I think the benefit of having children, we go home and it's all about them when we're at home.

But I think just the understanding of what we're doing has been beneficial to do it together.

Q. Obviously NC State has a really great post presence with River Baldwin, but they have some really good guards on the perimeter -- fast, athletic, great scorers. How do you approach that kind of challenge with your team, especially this team has grown a lot defensively but that wasn't always this team's strengths?

KELLIE HARPER: Obviously, I think the balance that NC State has offensively with their personnel, with their actions, you just have to be great in all areas defensively. They do such a good job of taking advantage of your mistakes, whether that's in the paint or on the perimeter. I think they can spread the ball around and find opportunities for them to attack in different ways.

I think that is a huge challenge, guarding actions and not making mistakes.

But hopefully we can go back and look at some of our games that we've played, some teams that maybe are similar in style. Maybe bits and pieces of each of the teams we've played to try to help give us confidence in what we're doing tomorrow.

Q. Can you speak to having Tamari back? Can you

describe the mental fight she's had to be back on the court this last year and a half and where she's grown?

KELLIE HARPER: Well, first off, everyone knows the physical challenge that Tamari had to get back out on the court. And obviously last year, when we got the diagnosis, we were just extremely concerned for her health.

Once we were able to get past that and realize she was going to be okay, there was this unknown of what's going to happen. And she wanted to come back. She wanted to try it. But we also knew that we had to be patient with her. She had to be patient with herself. We continued to tell people to be patient with her.

I knew that this was going to be a months-long process. And that's what you're seeing now. We knew that for her to get back to where she needed to be to be able to help this team at an elite level, it was just going to take a lot of time and a lot of reps and some ups and downs through those months.

And that's where we're at right now. It makes her a great story. You talk about all that and how we knew this was going to take time. But when you know that and you then put yourself in her shoes and you think about having to deal with the emotions, not just of a diagnosis in that moment but wanting to be somewhere and it taking so long to get there. That's hard. And I am so proud of her and her fight.

And she just came back every day. She never got too down, when I know it was hard. Just really happy that she's been rewarded with being able to play and being able to be effective on both ends of the court as this season has progressed. I'm just really proud of her and happy for her. Really happy.

Q. There have been a lot of new eyes on women's basketball but I think sometimes the history gets a little bit lost in the shuffle and a little disrespected. You had so many great moments in the NCAA Tournament. I want to ask two questions. What were your standout moments for you when you were playing in this tournament? And also what were your memories before you played growing up?

KELLIE HARPER: Goodness, the standout moments. I'm very blessed to have had a lot of opportunities in this tournament and obviously at the elite level.

Us winning three national championships, it's hard to pick one moment, but we'll go with the 39-0 season, my junior year. It was truly remarkable for our team to cap that season, that perfect season with a national championship.



It's so hard to do. Oh, my goodness, it is so hard to win and much less win and go undefeated an entire season. You look back to that.

We didn't know how hard it was in that moment. I mean, we couldn't really appreciate it until we didn't win the following year, which leads me to my second win was probably losing actually in the NCAA Tournament for the first time. That was my senior year, Elite Eight. Still not over it, but it's okay I can talk about it now.

It was tough. You remember sometimes those moments that you hurt, the painful moments. Sometimes those are more vivid. And they're hard.

When I was growing up, I remember watching Pat Summitt, and I remember her teams. And the year before I got to Tennessee, the loss to UConn I believe in the national championship game.

And there's so many great players that came through. And me growing up in the state of Tennessee, those are the players that I watched. Nikki McCray was one that, she was just fun to watch. She played so hard and her arms covered the entire court, it felt like. She was such a great defensive player and a great athlete.

Q. You mentioned pulling from past games to prepare for NC State. How important do you feel is that No. 1 strength of schedule, SEC gauntlet you had to play through, especially at this time of year?

KELLIE HARPER: I think that helped prepare us. There have been numerous times late this season that we've been in tough situations and we've showed a lot of poise. That's what we want to draw from as well, not just the actions and how we need to play, but just the poise in those big games.

Our team really has stayed pretty steady, kept emotions in check. And I think that's a really good strength to have going into a game like this.

Q. Can I avoid early enrollees? Just seems like a bundle of fun whenever we see her around the team. What has it been like to have her youthful presence around? I know some players have said it makes them feel old. But how beneficial has it been to have someone who is so young and excited to be around and navigate college?

KELLIE HARPER: Kaniya Boyd has been great for our team. A lot of people don't know who she is. Early enrollees, not playing this year, rehabbing an injury. Her personality has been very endearing to the entire team.

She's so young, everyone wants to take care of her a little bit. But she has really connected with everybody on the team. I think she has been huge, huge for the personality and the culture of our basketball team. I think she arrived on campus right when we needed her.

Q. Wes gave a little more flavor to the hiring of Jon. He said that he really wanted you and he scrounged up a little bit of money to get Jon and told him all he had to do -- I get it now -- was go to lunch with him every day. I wasn't sure what that meant, and he could play golf whenever he wanted. Wes said he was stunned when Jon left him to follow you to Carolina --

KELLIE HARPER: This is true.

Q. On a more poignant note -- I knew about it, but I never thought about it -- he noted that you followed two legends, Kay Yow at NC State and Pat Summitt at Tennessee. And that is very hard to do. Obviously you knew both women. You played for Pat. He also said that Kellie is right where she needs to be right now. Have you ever been able to sort of wrap your arms around the fact you had to follow two legends at two different schools and all that entails?

KELLIE HARPER: Yep, it's a lot. It was a lot. And it always will be. That's okay. I think for me, in both of those situations, you take those jobs with the understanding of what you're following. You understand the challenges. You understand the emotions, and you can't get in the middle of it when it's difficult and start complaining that you didn't know this was going to be this way.

There's a lot. There's a lot with each situation. But that's what I've always tried to tell people. I'm never going to step up here try to be somebody I'm not. I'm never going to try to be somebody else. And the best I can do is be the best version of me, regardless of where that is. I've learned a lot from every place I've been, every coach I've worked with, every coach I've worked for, every player I've coached, all of those experiences. I mean, it's what life is. You just take all of that and you embrace it. You learn from it and you move forward and try to be the best version of you the next day.

Hopefully people that know me know that I love life. I enjoy what I do. And I'm very fortunate to be in the position I'm in.

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