

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

Monday, March 25, 2024

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Wes Moore

Aziaha James

Saniya Rivers

Media Conference



SANIYA RIVERS: Yeah, I think we knew it was a possibility. We watched the game when they played South Carolina, and they came back from like a 20-point deficit, so we didn't want it to happen, but it happened, and like she said, we just kept our head up, stayed together. As the point guard, I tried to make sure that we stayed composed at the end, and I think that worked well for us in the end.

Q. It felt like all the guards that you guys made a concerted effort to drive to the rim. Was that you wanting to be more physical with them in the paint?

SANIYA RIVERS: Absolutely. We always want to be aggressive. Coach Moore really emphasizes touching the paint, whether we're hitting the post or whether it's the guards attacking. Sometimes we get the lay-up, sometimes we have to kick. I think both options were there for us tonight. I think our 3-ball looked pretty decent, but I got a couple lay-ups in there. It's hard going in there against those trees in there, you know, Tamari Key, but you've got to go in there with confidence, just put your head down and go.

AZIAHA JAMES: I agree with Saniya. Coach Moore just emphasizes on just attacking them more.

Q. Saniya, right there at the end of the game you had that big key block, sort of took off running, got fouled and saw the smile grow across your face. What was going through your head?

SANIYA RIVERS: It felt good. I knew she was about to shoot it. Before she even caught the ball I knew she was going to shoot it. They were just going to have to call the foul, but I knew I was going to get it clean. It felt good, and I knew they were going to foul me, but it would have been nice to go down there, maybe get a dunk if Coach Moore would have gave me the go-ahead. I see how he's looking at me now. (Laughter.)

Q. Aziaha, the way you use the backboard is so unique. How did that develop? Have you always used the backboard in that way?

NC State 79, Tennessee 72

WES MOORE: I'm just really proud of these young ladies. After jumping out to a nice lead at halftime, I thought we played extremely well that first half. But we knew they were going to make a run, and they got so much talent, they're so well-prepared, well-coached, that we knew it was going to be a battle.

After they made the run, these young ladies somehow found the grit and competitiveness to find a way to get it done.

Really proud of them. Come a long way.

When you get to this point, it's a great accomplishment. We're going to enjoy it for a day or two, and then obviously you get greedy and try to get a little bit more. But really proud of the plays in particular these two made all night long. They stepped up big time. Again, they worked hard all summer, and now they're enjoying the fruits of their labor, and our team is, as well.

Great team win, but obviously these two played really well.

Q. When it got down to two points after you'd been up 20, what was going through your mind at that point? Walk me through what those moments were like, trying to wrestle control back?

AZIAHA JAMES: You know, just keeping our head up. It doesn't matter, like you said, we were two points up, and we came to our huddle and was like, don't give up; just your head up, keep pushing, and that's what we did.



AZIAHA JAMES: Just in the summer, just working on it day in, day out, just keep going, reps and reps. It just turned out good for me at the end, in this game.

Q. After the disappointment of last season, how much more does this mean to you now to get to the Sweet 16 after having the experience not making it?

SANIYA RIVERS: It feels good because last year was ugly. It wasn't fun. This year has been so much fun since the first game, and being able to go to the Sweet 16 with my girls, it feels amazing. I haven't been here since my freshman year of college and actually feeling like I'm a part of it this time just really means the world to me. So I'm excited.

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely the way we came together at the beginning of the season we told ourselves we did not want the same thing to happen like last year. We worked hard for this, and like Coach Moore said, it's coming right now for us.

Q. How do you guys complement each other as a tandem in this game and in general?

AZIAHA JAMES: We always come together. We always say, look, we've got each other's back. If you mess up, I got you. If I mess up, she got me. So it's like that.

SANIYA RIVERS: I'm telling you, I don't know what I would do without Zaza in my ears. We probably hug at least three times a game. It's always going to be a point I get in my head, and I've got to get out of that, especially being the point guard, but she's always there. Those free throws when I was going like 1 for 2 in the stretch there, she was in my ear, come on, we just need one, maybe two, but definitely Zaza, she's always in my ear, and I appreciate her very much.

Q. For either of y'all. Ever been to Portland before?

AZIAHA JAMES: No, this is my first time.

SANIYA RIVERS: Me either. I was actually supposed to go when I played AAU but COVID hit, so I'm really excited. Hopefully Coach lets us go to the Nike outlet. I'm really excited.

AZIAHA JAMES: Adidas outlet.

SANIYA RIVERS: Oh, sorry. Maybe just window shop at Nike.

WES MOORE: I promise you we'll go to the Adidas outlet.

We won't go to the other outlet.

Q. Zoe Brooks played nearly half an hour of court time tonight, 16 points, six boards, two assists. Obviously she's been showing out all year, but talk about her growth as a freshman to help get y'all to this point.

AZIAHA JAMES: Y'all seen a freshman? I didn't see no freshman out there. That wasn't a freshman. She stepped up. She did what she was supposed to do and she got us our points, our baskets and good looks, so that wasn't a freshman out there.

SANIYA RIVERS: No, she definitely wasn't a freshman tonight. I think Zoe has grown more mentally this year. Of course she's going to score, she's going to do things for the team, but just mentally being able to lock in when things aren't going her way, I feel like she's definitely improving slowly but surely, so hopefully her mental continues to grow so she can continue to scratch the surface skill-wise.

Q. Third time in school history where both the men's team and the women's team reached the Sweet 16 --

WES MOORE: It's been since I think '89 is what I was told and it happened twice before, but '89, so neither one of us were alive in '89, right?

Q. You made the trip to D.C. to support Kevin Keatts in the conference tournament. Kevin Keatts is here tonight. Talk about not only the achievement that both teams have made but the support that both programs have for each other?

WES MOORE: Yeah, our players on both sides really are good friends, tight, and Coach Keatts and I, I love the guy. I'm so happy for him. Even with all the success, he comes to our game tonight, and he called me at 8:00 this morning, which I really wasn't ready for, but when it's Coach Keatts you answer.

So happy for both. They have been on an unbelievable run. I've enjoyed it so much. We stayed over here at the State View, and we had a little meeting room in the back, and of course we're watching their game, we're going to watch film as soon as it was over, the bar was right in front of us. Well, we were streaming so they would go wild in the bar, and then we were like, okay, something good is happening. But it was a lot of fun, and let's keep it going.

Q. The players touched on Zoe Brooks and how she's stepping up, but Maddie Cox -- three to go in the half, some good defense on Jackson. Talk about how the freshmen stepped up today.



WES MOORE: Yeah, no doubt. Obviously Zoe has been doing a lot for us all year long. But again, on that stage, she hit some really big shots for us and made some nice plays. Then Maddie Cox, we put her on Jackson and she might have done as good a job as anybody. Maddie is just so smart. You tell her something one time, she's going to go out there and execute it. Then the three she hit at the end of the half was unbelievable.

Yeah, I'm excited about them, and again, we wouldn't be here without them. Again, it's been fun to watch them grow up kind of in front of our eyes.

Q. I was asking the players about the idea of the games getting tighter and tighter. It goes from 20 down to two, and they mentioned the South Carolina game that they had already seen them do something very recently. What was going through your mind in those stretches and sort of the message you were trying to give them before Aziaha got a couple of those buckets that gave y'all some space again?

WES MOORE: Well, again, I coach pretty much the same way, again, no matter what's going on.

I got a little disappointed we took an early shot that one possession, took an early three. We've got to recognize time and score a little bit. But yeah, we went through a stretch we didn't hit shots. Quite honestly, we just had a hard time hitting some shots. But they hung in there, kept their heads up, and then hit some big ones when we had to have it.

The bench kind of recommended we run that one play, set play, and I think Aziaha came behind the stagger screen and hit the big three.

Again, it was just a matter of time hopefully that we'd hit a shot and get the momentum back, and again, I think in the first quarter we gave up 23 points, did a much better job -- again, we owned the second quarter, they owned the third quarter, and the book ends were pretty even.

But it's a game of runs, and I'm just proud of them for keeping their heads up. They could have real easily let the pressure get to them. No doubt the crowd is a big plus. Let's face it, playing here at home. That's why all year long I'm so stressed out because I know every game matters so much if you're trying to be a top 16 seed and get to host. They've worked their tails off all year to get that little advantage, and just proud of them for cashing in on it.

Q. You briefly mentioned that we held Tennessee I think it was under 10 points in the second quarter, but

in the first quarter they were shooting very well from the field. What went through your mind in between quarters to make those defensive changes?

WES MOORE: Well, we did make a matchup change, and we went small on Jackson, which, I mean, what a player. They're saying she'll be second or third pick in the draft, and it's easy to see why. She's a matchup nightmare. If you put size on her, she's going to step out, shoot the three or take you off the bounce. If you go small, she's going to inside and post you up, and the coaches there do a great job of recognizing the matchup and exploiting it.

But I thought Madison Hayes in the second quarter did a really nice job, and then I agree when we put Maddie Cox in there, the assistants were saying we may want to shift it a little, and I said, no, let's give her a chance. I think her length helped a little bit maybe on a couple of little jumpers.

Again, they're a very talented team. Key was killing us on the block, burying us down there, and then, like I said, Jackson, what can you say about her. You just hope that maybe she misses a couple.

Q. Talking about Jackson going top 3 in the WNBA draft, Cameron Brink up next also predicted to go top 3. Two very different players, but what is it like to prepare for two very high-profile athletes back-to-back?

WES MOORE: I'll be honest with you, I haven't done a whole lot on Stanford yet, so I can't tell you much. I did watch the game on TV last night, but obviously we've had a coach, an assistant that's been preparing for Stanford in case we face them.

As soon as we're done and I get out of here, I'll get a computer with a bunch of clips on it and we'll start going over the scout. It is good to be able to catch our breath a little bit. Obviously Tara VanDerveer, Hall-of-Fame coach, winningest coach in the country, and Stanford, obviously a program with a lot of legacy. But at the same time, hey, this time of year, you've just got to hope -- like I said, hope you can match up with her a little bit, slow her down some, and hope we get hot. I thought we shot the heck out of it in the first half, and we just need to try to keep that going a little more consistently.

But yeah, it's scary, no doubt, to have her sitting there next. But hey, I'm glad we got the problem, you know?

Q. Speaking of Stanford, they will be joining the ACC next year, so this is kind of like a preview matchup. Heading into watching film, is that a little bit on your mind?



WES MOORE: Well, we're going to see if we can make this count as our game out there for next year, and since we're going out on the West Coast, so we'll let you know how that goes. Again, I think it's great for our conference, it's exciting, and with all the shuffling around of teams and all that, you've got to stay up with the times.

I'm excited about those three teams coming in. I was hoping I was going to dodge Cameron Brink, but I guess we'll get to see her. I know she's declared she's leaving, but I guess we'll get a peek at her.

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