

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

Monday, March 25, 2024

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

Tennessee Lady Volunteers Coach Kellie Harper

Rickeya Jackson

Tamari Key

Media Conference

NC State 79, Tennessee 72

KELLIE HARPER: Obviously I'm disappointed that we didn't get the win. I would have loved to have continued to take this team on the journey that we were on.

Again, playing their best basketball at the end of the year. They were a lot of fun to coach.

But just didn't have what we needed today. Obviously NC State is a really good basketball team. We knew that coming in.

But I'm proud of my team. Obviously there was a lot of fight on that team. Just really proud of who they are and who they've been all year.

Q. Rickea, what will you remember about these two years finishing off your career here at Tennessee?

RICKEA JACKSON: Just going to remember the good times at Tennessee, the way that Tennessee molded me into the woman I am today. I'm just grateful to have come here, and I feel like I made the right decision, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Q. Tamari, what does it mean the past couple years to get to play with Rickea and Jasmine at Tennessee?

TAMARI KEY: Yeah, about the same as Rickea said. I feel like we're a big family. We've been through a lot this season, so just knowing that we had each other's back out there and we'll fight for each other made it really special.



Q. Rickea, what about this group that's coming back? What have you seen in them that makes you confident in them stepping into bigger roles next year and leading this program?

RICKEA JACKSON: Just how hard they're going to practice. I feel like they are vets now, even the young ones that's come in. I feel like everybody just comes in and does their job and we push each other day in and day out, so they're going to be dangerous next year. I'm excited to see it.

Q. Tamari, what was the change from the second to third quarter that allowed you to be so effective going into the second half?

TAMARI KEY: I think just staying locked in on the defensive end. Gave up 25 points in the second quarter, nine in the third quarter, so I think just coming back out, knowing that we had to fight, and it started on defense with getting stops.

Q. Tamari, I know you have options in front of you and need to decide what's next. In the short term do you look back and are you proud of yourself for getting back this year after what happened to you?

TAMARI KEY: Yeah. I feel like together as a team, I think we've all been through so much in this year, last year, so just knowing we were all able to rally together and keep playing for each other made this group really special.

Q. Rickea, I know this loss is difficult right now. Obviously you have a lot in front of you coming up. What do you think are your biggest takeaways from your time at Tennessee?

RICKEA JACKSON: Just growing on and off the court.

Q. Can you talk to us about what the official said when NCAA State called that time-out? You thought that you guys had already grabbed that steal. Officiating has been a pretty hot topic this season across the country, and I'm wondering what they told you and if you want to comment on it.

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I was just told the whistle got blown before the ball was inbounded. I don't know if they checked it -- I asked them to check. I'm not sure if they could.

For us, the games aren't just singular. We had that same situation earlier this year, and it was the reverse. I was calling a time-out, whistle blew, but they didn't give it to us. That was honestly what I was saying.

Q. This game got really tight at the end. You guys were fouling to extend the game. Rickea Jackson only gets one field goal attempt in the last three minutes. What was NC State doing to keep her from getting that, and why weren't you guys able to get her more looks near the end?

KELLIE HARPER: Well, they doubled her and Jewel got open, made a shot. Next time down or one of the next possessions we were trying to get her the ball, and we just didn't see her. I think part of that was their ball pressure on the ball. Obviously we're trying to get her the ball. Everybody in the gym knows it.

Q. When you look back on the season in a few years, what do you think you'll remember from it?

KELLIE HARPER: That's what I talked to the team about in the locker room. Man, this has not been easy for them this year. They went through a lot. A lot.

With injuries combined with some tough losses, I'm telling you, it would have broken a lot of teams, hands down.

But they believed in our staff and they believed in each other and they continued to work hard and push.

The result isn't the result that we wanted, but the result was we were playing our best basketball late. Unfortunately maybe not today, but we've been playing really good, and I think we -- I mean, we can be proud of who we ended up, where we ended up.

That's what I'm going to remember. Obviously if maybe some things went our way, maybe a ball bounced our way in November, like two -- two possessions in November, we're hosting right now. That makes a difference.

They continue to fight, and I'm proud of that.

Q. The South Carolina game was just a gut wrenching loss, but you guys showed a lot of fight in that one, and here you are a few games later, you're down 20 and you get it all the way down to two. What do you

think was sort of going through your mind and sort of the way the players were responding in those moments, that they had done it before getting out of a hole and were flirting with doing it again on the road?

KELLIE HARPER: They've done it a lot this year. They've been able to wipe away a lot of big leads, and I think the one thing that has always helped us, our emotions rarely get the best of us. We stay pretty even keeled.

In the end, our adjustments, the team can make adjustments. They do a good job going out and continuing to fight and continuing to execute and not trying to hit the home run play but just chip away, chip away, chip away.

I think there's no panic with this group. They just -- they've been pretty steady in a lot of adverse situations this year.

Q. It feels like the junior class really kind of came into their own this season and their roles especially today when Kaiya went in that third quarter she changed the energy of the game, Sara being a consistent contributor as a starter and Jillian and Karoline, too, but what about their development and what they've shown you this season gives you confidence about them leading this team and stepping into big roles next year?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I think our players, our returners have had a lot of big-game experience this year. They played in some tough games, in some tight games, in some physical games. They're very experienced. And they're very motivated.

That is some really hard-working players. They get in the gym, they put in a lot of time. They want to be good. They want to be coached. To me, you've got the experience and the work ethic with a lot of our returners.

Q. Coach, only eight points in that second quarter. What was NC State able to do well and what was Tennessee unable to do to create good shots in that quarter?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I'll tell you what, our offensive execution today was not where I wanted it to be. At the end of the day, 72 points is probably not bad against NC State. At the end of the day it was probably more of our defense.

But our offensive execution wasn't where I wanted it to be, and I'll tell you, I'll give credit to Reynolds Coliseum. It was very loud. Our team had a difficult time communicating our sets. That happened several times.

Second half was a little bit better because they were in front of us. But it was tough in that first half.

I didn't think we executed great in the first quarter. We just made shots. We didn't get those same shots in the second.

Q. You said you weren't sure if they went to the monitor and checked that. That happens a lot in late-game situations. I wondered, have you ever thought about or wished that in college basketball you had one challenge the way that they do in college football and you could challenge almost any call and then if you lose it you lose a time-out but maybe it could change some things?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I've thought about it. We've thought about it a lot recently. I'm sure there's some implications that I haven't thought of, but right off the top of my head, I think that that's something that could be a positive. I don't want to slow the game down, but I'm telling you, in some of these tight games you want to make sure you get it right.

I wouldn't mind seeing that -- now, you might explain it to me and I might change my mind later if there's some implications I haven't thought about, but we were actually discussing it as a staff this weekend, talking about having a little red thing that you throw out on the court. Not really, but making it like football.

Q. The replay shows that the ball was in play, already had taken a bounce and was in play on the court when the time-out was granted --

KELLIE HARPER: Thanks.

Q. I know you could what-if these things to death. I know you can go back to the travel call against South Carolina with 3.8 seconds left. You can't linger on them because they're done, but how hard is it to stomach the fact that the outcome of two postseason games was possibly altered by either a missed call or a bad call?

KELLIE HARPER: In these games, these teams are really good. One mistake, one missed shot, one missed assignment at any point in the game can change it.

Q. Can you just kind of sum up what the senior class meant and obviously Rickea and JP who are out of eligibility?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, obviously, man, Jasmine Powell, to go from what she -- how she played last year and then

to have the load that she had this year, especially when Destinee got hurt, she had a lot on her, and I'm really proud of her and how she performed.

She had an injury that kept her from doing an awful lot -- people don't even know all that. But she's been tough all year, and I'm so proud of that.

Then obviously Rickea is special. I mean, just special. So gifted. When you get a chance to watch her play, watch her in person, she's just so talented. I mean, she's one of the best players in the country. She's that good and deserves every accolade that she gets and probably some she doesn't get, to be honest with you. She's super talented.

It's been fun for me as a coach to move the pieces and to put them in the best position to be successful when you have a player like Rickea Jackson. It gives you so many options.

Q. You just talked about Rickea the basketball player, but I'm thinking of the SEC tournament press conference you were really emotional, and Jewel did it, too, but Rickea grabbed your shoulder on the way out to comfort you. How would you describe the relationship you've been able to build with her and what that means to you?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I'm proud of her and grateful that -- I'm grateful that she chose Tennessee, and I think that, like she said, I think it was a great decision for her and what hopefully we were able to do for her. She has grown up a lot in the last two years, and my thought is now that she's walking out, I feel really good about who she's going to be now and how successful she's going to be at the next level.

We've worked really hard to try to help prepare her for life, as we do all of them, and for what's in store for her. I just hope that she continues to do what she's doing because it is really special and fun to watch.

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