

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Richmond vs Duke

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

Richmond Spiders

Coach Aaron Roussell

Addie Budnik

Grace Townsend

Media Conference

Q. 50 wins the last two years, obviously including 29 wins this year. What's going on at Richmond?

ADDIE BUDNIK: Yeah, it's definitely been a build over the past couple years, but now we're just building off of experience from the years before, and it's just accumulated over time, and I think you're seeing a product of that, especially over the past two years. Our chemistry off the court is super strong, and I think that's translating on the court, as well.

GRACE TOWNSEND: I think for sure, adding on to what Addie said, it's definitely been adding up over the past year, especially the last two years. We've been able to see our chemistry on the court as well as off the court, and I think that's showing in the way we play and how well we've been doing.

Q. You guys have played Duke already; talk about playing Duke, what you see from that program here and what you're expecting tomorrow in the first round of the NCAAs.

ADDIE BUDNIK: Yeah, obviously they're a super athletic team, but that was our first game of the season. We've grown a ton as a team, and they have, as well, so it's definitely going to be a different feel, a different matchup out there. But we're just excited to be able to compete, especially on such a large stage.

GRACE TOWNSEND: Adding on to that, I think they are a very athletic team, but at the same time, like Addie said, they're a different team than they are when we played them in November as well as we are a different team than when



we played them in November. Putting in what we've added on and what we've learned from it and competing and having a great game tomorrow.

Q. You had 26 wins in the regular season. Without knowing how the at-larges would play out, was there pressure to win the conference tournament even after such a successful regular season?

GRACE TOWNSEND: Pressure? I don't know if it was as much pressure as much as us coming together and being like -- even though we did so well in the regular season, winning the regular season, we still wanted to push forward. We still knew we weren't done yet. Coach Roussell relayed that to us, and we were all confident, and we still had more to do. So I don't think there was much pressure; I think as we all wanted it and we went and got it, and hopefully we keep going with it.

ADDIE BUDNIK: Yeah, there were definitely some big games in the regular season that helped us prepare for where we are now and being able to compete here. I think coming in it was definitely something on our radar. We didn't talk about it every day, winning a championship, but once we got there, we had full confidence in ourselves. We knew it was something we could really do, and we were on a mission in that tournament, and we were able to do that.

Q. Can you touch on what it means to be here with your senior group, what it means to be playing in March Madness with this group and kind of the team atmosphere?

ADDIE BUDNIK: Yeah, we're all so grateful to be here. This is just an amazing experience, especially just walking into the hotel yesterday, seeing all the Spiders everywhere. It's something that we've never experienced, and being able to experience this with a group that's so close, so tight knit is something we'll never forget.

GRACE TOWNSEND: We're very blessed and grateful to be given this opportunity but also keep going with this opportunity. I think coming in freshman year we bought into a vision that we did not see yet, and we put in the hard



work adding up over these last three years, and I think we're really excited to be here and we're excited to play, and this is an experience not everybody gets in a lifetime and we're grateful and staying present in that.

Q. You guys had a record-breaking season, a bunch of firsts for the Spiders and as a program. Is this something you take into account preparing for Duke tomorrow, or how have you guys celebrated and moved on? What's the game plan or preparation for Duke?

ADDIE BUDNIK: We definitely celebrated our victories over the past week, but now it's a new season, it's win or go home, so taking what we learned from all the games before, especially the first time we played Duke, and just being ready and preparing for tomorrow and just competing out there and winning on a big stage.

GRACE TOWNSEND: I think we've celebrated them and enjoyed them, but at the same time that was almost like yesterday's news, and we still have more to do, and we can't live off of what we did previously to get us where we are now but also remember the hard work that went into it and use that to play Duke tomorrow.

Q. You guys have won I believe 20 of your last 22 games, which is remarkable. What's the keys? What has been the driver of the winning ways here this year for your team?

ADDIE BUDNIK: We've definitely been a younger team in the past, and this year we're a little more older, more poised, more confident, and just building off of all that experience from years prior and just the games accumulating over the season, and I think that's showing on the court, and then those losses that we took, we learned from them. They were big learning experiences, whether it's defense, offense, and we were able to run with that and kind of make a run at the end of the season.

Q. Do you think it's helpful that you've played Duke once already this year?

ADDIE BUDNIK: Yeah, we definitely have some film on them, some things that we need to work on, which we went over, which is super helpful. Like I said earlier, they're definitely a bit of a different team now, like us, so taking that, learning from it, and implementing some of the new things that we've done.

Q. Grace, for you, being from Richmond, seeing this program in high school and now representing it, what does it mean to bring this program and the city of Richmond to a national stage?

GRACE TOWNSEND: I mean, for sure. I remember going to a couple of the games when I was in high school and seeing how when we come here and we evolve through the years and it becomes a winning program and we start buying into what the coaches are telling us and working hard on everything we do, and then we get to the A-10 championship and it's in Richmond. I had my whole family, a bunch of the crowd is there. It means the world.

I think also I wouldn't be here without anybody else that's here with me, so I think us all putting in all the hard work combining and trusting our chemistry and everything we've put into it, I think it's amazing to see how far we've come thus far, but we still want to keep going.

Q. Starting off, did those shoes come with you from Richmond after the A-10 championship?

AARON ROUSSELL: They came with me. There was a minor snafu. I put my 13-year-old in charge of bringing those along. They made it to Columbus and just by the skin of his chinny-chin-chin they made it off the plane on to the bus. That was the last-minute save from the 13-year-old in his one job.

But they are here, and they will be worn for the tournament for sure.

Q. How do you think you've grown or your team has grown since the season-opening loss against Duke?

AARON ROUSSELL: Well, I think, first off, I don't think we played very well that game, so we can kind of compare what we are right now to how we played that game. I think there's a tremendous amount of growth. But even before that, I thought we were in a better spot than what we showed that game.

I think we had to manage the disappointment, and I think anytime you have a championship team, a championship season, things are going well for you, you kind of have to look back at some times where it didn't go well, some adversity. You don't expect to get hit in the mouth and punched in the face the first game and have adversity happen right there. But we really had to check ourselves a little bit. I think we came into that game not overconfident by any stretch but feeling like things were in a good spot, and then the scoreboard kind of told you it wasn't in a good spot.

We kind of had to regroup, and not that we were on cloud nine going into it, not that we thought we were everything, but I think we kind of had to go back to the drawing board and kind of be a little bit more basic with what we were.



Offensively we've got to be a little bit more simple. Defensively we've got to up -- I hate to say effort, intensity, but it just didn't feel like we had it that game, and obviously we kind of got our tails kicked on the rebounding boards there, too.

All across the board, I think it definitely sent us back to the drawing board that first game.

Q. It's now been about a week and a half since winning the A-10 championship. How have you and your team spent that time, having a week in between winning and finding out where you're playing and then kind of a quick week to get to Columbus?

AARON ROUSSELL: Yeah, it was interesting for us. Our players were on spring break. I saw you at the A-10 tournament. You look at the scores from those games, and some people are like, oh, you coasted through that. I didn't feel like we coasted through that by any stretch. There was really good teams that we were playing. I thought we played incredibly well, and I thought our kids were very well prepared. They were outstanding during that time. But it still takes a lot on your body, and everything that leads up until that tournament.

There's three games in three days, all the stresses, everything that goes into it. You know your friends are on a little bit of a vacation and break.

We kept them in town kind of -- I wouldn't say celebrated, but kind of had our feel-good moments, had a couple days of practice, then we sent them home for a long weekend. A majority of them went home, just felt like that was a good thing for them to get away, to -- four or five months, whatever it had been during the season, so kind of sent them away, then we regrouped to practice that Sunday ahead of the selection show and then kind of got back into it.

But at the same point, too, you have to be prepared to go up and down here at the end of the week, but at the same point, this has still been 95 plus practices in a season.

These are not the same practices that they were three months ago. This is still I would say easy back into it, but you've got to be fresh. I've always felt that, and I thought we were in a really, really good spot with that two weeks ago. The fresher team at this time of the year has an advantage, and I think we've done a good job of making sure that we're prepared, the bodies are ready to kind of go up and down the grind of what this weekend will be for us, while at the same point still staying fresh.

Q. What are you doing to make sure that not only you but also your players enjoy this experience, especially the seniors that have worked four years to get to this moment?

AARON ROUSSELL: It's a great question. I think I've been a different levels and different expectations going into an NCAA Tournament. I think the first time at Bucknell has maybe a little bit different, and a lot went into that, but I think I looked back at that a little bit, and was like, we were prepared, but I think there was still a feeling of happy to be there.

I think when we went in '19 with Bucknell, it was the exact opposite. It was like, we're here, we have a chance to win this thing, and came really, really close to that.

This was unique for me and maybe for our kids in the sense that we had a week off in between. I've never had that week off between winning a championship and then finding out who your next opponent is going to be.

So I think just by nature, that allowed for a little bit of feel-good moments and celebrating to a certain extent, and not getting too big by any stretch, but this is an incredible experience. These young ladies have looked forward to this, have had this goal literally their entire life, and so you have to have some sort of celebratory moment. You have to let them feel good about this while still preparing for a game.

That weekend allowed for that. I think Grace said that earlier today. It does feel like it was so long ago. We felt really good about that. We made sure that our kids felt good that this was an achievement.

But kind of like the regular season championship, we kind of said, hey, this is an incredible achievement to win the regular season in the A-10. This was outstanding season for the A-10. Celebrate this, this is awesome, but we're going to hit pause right now and we're going to go attack the A-10 tournament.

I think we kind of hit that midweek last week, too, of like, this was great. Everybody is telling us how amazing this is. You guys feel how amazing this is. All right, this is great, let's hit pause, let's go take care of some business in the NCAA Tournament. You have the rest of your life to feel good about this.

Every time you come back for an alumni game, every time you're here -- for the rest of the year, you still will be able to celebrate this. It's not over, but let's hit pause and kind of focus on the tournament.

Our kids have been great with that. Obviously we have an older group, but our kids have been really, really good with that.

Q. Coach, do you think it's been helpful or will it be helpful that you've already played Duke once this year?

AARON ROUSSELL: It will be helpful, and I think we've benefitted that -- every time you're in a conference tournament, but I think in particular the Rhode Island game. I think obviously you're watching film on Rhode Island for that championship game and trying to prepare. During that window, the fact that you can go back and watch those guys twice playing yourself I think helps.

Now, I think Kara said this, too, yeah, we played them this year, but that was the first game of the year. So in many ways that was like playing them last year because all of the prep, everything you're doing is you're preparing on the 2022-23 Duke Blue Devils and you're kind of preparing yourself from the year before.

So I think this has been different in the sense that obviously we haven't (audio interruption) collegiate basketball games. I think it helps as far as scheme-wise, I think it helps from a comfort standpoint, maybe some marketing salesman ship from us telling our players, hey, we've seen these guys before, but I think from a coaching standpoint, even from a mature player standpoint, we know that was forever ago and may as well have been from last year's season, too.

Q. Fast forward to now, what do you see now when you look at film of Duke?

AARON ROUSSELL: With Duke right now, the athleticism hasn't changed since the first time we played these guys. They are just an incredibly athletic team. That's not -- the A-10 coach sitting up here talking about the ACC and how athletic they are. They're a really athletic team for the ACC. Some of the things that they bothered us with the first time, they're bothering top-10 teams in the country with some of the same stuff.

I think that's going to be a challenge. So I think that part stands out. Kara has always been a tremendous coach in everything, and obviously a tremendous player, too. But I've always sensed from the last few years of playing these guys and watching them, they pride themselves on the defensive end of the court.

They were a really good defensive team when we saw them before, but they're doing some of those same things to top-10 teams, like I said, defensively. I think that's the

first thing that stands out is just how well they play defensively.

On the offensive end, tremendously talented, but they really beat us up on the O-boards, and I think they've been doing that to everybody this year.

Q. You mentioned earlier about the veteran presence on your team, but what does it mean to have a lot of girls that have been with you for the past couple years and now share this moment with them?

AARON ROUSSELL: I think it's great in the sense that they've been through the challenges with me and with us. Not to go on the transfer portal route. But I think we've challenged these guys throughout their time to make them better, to make them stronger, and I think they've been able to develop here at our university and with our coaching staff.

We've had tremendous loyalty, but obviously just lineage with our assistant coaches that have kind of been here during their whole time from recruiting on. Obviously with me -- they're experienced college basketball players, and there's a lot of experienced basketball players out there. They're experienced college basketball players in our system, with our coaching staff.

I'd be the first to tell you we've gotten tremendous boost from that. These guys have played in the same system to a certain extent. It was shared with me, like 92, 93 percent of our minutes on our roster this year are played by kids that have been here the entire time. 95 percent of our scoring is by "homegrown talent." Every start this season has been from a kid that's been in our program the entire time.

We couldn't find anybody, definitely anybody in our conference. We've tried to find top 50 -- we couldn't find a whole lot of teams and really didn't find any teams out there in the same boat, that you had that much continuity with your team.

When you run an offense like ours and get benefit from reads and as well as we played in the A-10 tournament, some of that was just hands off, Coach, we got this. Let's not -- I told our coaches, let's not get in their way. There was a couple of moments where it was like, I don't got a whole lot to say in this time-out and it's definitely not us changing anything. These guys are kind of rolling and peaking at the right time, and that comes from experience. But like I said, experience with each other and with our coaching staff I think has been vital for where we are right now.

Q. Following up about the history of this season for you, so many accolades, so many accomplishments for this team individually, but what does it mean to you to have a part in that history?

AARON ROUSSELL: I know a lot of coaches say this, but I sincerely -- it just isn't about me. It's not about us. I've said this to some administrators this week. You always want to tell your players how cool this moment can be, how life-changing this moment can be. It's always, yeah, yeah, Coach, no, that would be really cool. Everybody wants to go to the tournament. That would be really cool.

But seeing them get to experience celebrating a championship that night, telling them, hey, man, this is going to change your relationship with each other. This is like a blood sisterhood that changes. My relationship with you guys changes when you're champions.

Oh, yeah, yeah, Coach, that all sounds great, but you don't ever get to feel it until you feel it. Our kids walking into the locker room here -- walking into the hotel yesterday, it's just that big-time moment that, like Grace said, not everybody gets to experience this. Everybody says they had a great experience. Everybody gets to -- you don't have to win a championship to have a great college sports experience. But when you get to have a championship, like that changes everything.

I told them that I think the Saturday after the semifinal. Allow yourself five minutes to think about the coolest day of your life because that's going to be tomorrow, and then we're going to focus on what it takes to get there. Then Sunday was like, this is about to be the coolest day of your life. Then at the end of the game for them to be like, Coach, this was incredible, this is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me.

So it's not so much about me. I don't want to be been there, done that, because it's still always cool as a coach anytime you can do that. But you just want it so badly, so desperately for those kids to experience this, and now that they get to -- I think for me and the coaching staff, it means the world, and that kind of gives us the warm feeling to give them that.

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