

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UCF Knights

Katie

Abrahamson-Henderson

Diamond Battles

Masseny Kaba

Tay Sanders

Postgame Press Conference

UCF 53, South Florida 45

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: First of all great job to USF, that was a battle. Every year since I've been here it's always been a battle, you know, so congratulations to them. And for me and this team, I mean, I was just joking with Diamond that it's TOY, Team of the Year, not Coach of the Year, Team of the Year. They're amazing they really wanted this bad, they stayed the course. Worked really hard. We had a really tough preseason, played a lot of really good schools. I think it really got us ready for the season in the American, and we did pretty much set a lot of goals and we really ended up accomplishing them.

So that's why I say it's Team of the Year because I just, like, get them ready, get them ready, keep them going and going. But they have to go out there and execute every single day, every single practice and, you know, to get to this point.

And this was for our super seniors, especially the two at the end. This is their last year. Diamond is coming back, thank goodness, next year. But for them, they didn't have to come back. And they came back with a purpose and a reason. And just super proud of them. And these three, these three captains really led our team the whole year and, you know, went through a lot. They had to deal with a lot of things personally, but they also helped their teammates deal with some things personally, and we just kept saying it's going to be worth it. It's going to be worth



it. It's going to be hard but it's going to be worth it and pretty much ended up today being worth it.

Q. Congratulations on the win. For the players, how much of a motivation and how sweet is it that it was against USF? It was so close with them last year and then you guys come out here this year and get the W over them?

MASSENY KABA: I mean, for me I wanted to play USF because it was like a bittersweet moment, especially when we found out they won last night, you know, we won before them. And it was like we were here last year in the same position, and it's like who is going to win this game, us or them? It's going to be who wants it more.

We came short last year and I made a commitment that if I came back we was going to win and that's what we did.

Q. I have a question: I just want to ask, what was it like overcoming adversity this entire year and staying together as a group?

DIAMOND BATTLES: I think Abe and the coaches have prepared us for each moments of this year. We had so many downs, so many ups, so many in-betweens. They taught us to stick together as a team, as a unit. When we are together, it's really hard to break us. Our bond is unbreakable. No matter what, nobody can break our bond.

So when we're on the floor and, you know, teams go on runs, we know how to stay together, stick the course and fight through adversity. Everything is not going to be easy and pretty. Our whole season is very gritty. We get everything out of the mud, if you know what I mean.

But these two, they set the tone in practice. Coming back from last year and everybody knows the expectations of this team. So I mean, adversity kind of don't faze us anymore because we know how to deal with it.

Q. First off congratulations, ladies. Coach, let me go ahead and start with you. Earlier in the year, we had the conversation about free throws and how important they were to what was going on. In the first half, I

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don't think you got to the line at all and in the second half, 20 free throws, most of them hit. How big of a turn was that for what you guys were doing to attack the basket?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: It was a huge turn because I did go in at halftime and I said that. I said we have gotten to the foul times zero times and that's not the way we play. We get to the foul line. We're really tough, we're really aggressive, we draw fouls, we drive to the basket and we were just settling a little bit, and they came out and threw the first punch and they did a really good job. At halftime I went in and made sure we've got to go in there and expect to get hit. You're going to get hit and you have to finish some shots.

We started to go in the second half and got there 20 times, which was big.

Q. Something I wanted to add too: Obviously Diamond and Masseny were both huge, but there's a lot of things I felt like took place that aren't on the stat line with Destiny Thomas helping Masseny take some of the hits from Mununga and battling there in the post. How huge was she?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Especially the second half. She hit some big shots, hit huge free throws, got some big-time defensive rebounds, and in the press she got some steals and things. Last year when we played in this conference championship game, Desto was in there and she really remembered last year and it kind of brought back memories when we went in at halftime, and I think she made a shift in her mind that she didn't want that to happen again. I think she really just came to play the second half and really stepped up for us

Q. For Masseny: You expected this to be an incredibly physical game. Just kind of take us -- does it get any tougher than this game in your mind?

MASSENY KABA: I don't really know. I haven't played every team in the country, so I can't speak on that. But in the conference, I would say this is one of the toughest teams to play against. They're very physical, their post players are strong and big as well. It was very tough especially being triple-teamed and double-teamed. Sometimes you can't see, getting pushed and shoved around. The refs can't see everything because there's a crowd around you. It was very physical in there but I pushed through and the team helped me out.

Q. As much as you were talking about the physical you were mentioning about the extracurricular, how much did mental toughness come in the paint there?

MASSENY KABA: I think I've grown to be mentally tough. It comes with years. I've been here for five years now. My freshman year I really didn't like physicality but Coach Abe would always tell me someone was better than me, and that would make me go harder.

Now that I'm older, I know the game of basketball. Especially playing USF, played them for five years now. I know they're very physical. So to me I already had it set in my mind. So I was mentally prepared for it.

Q. Coach, obviously there were a lot of tears and a lot of emotion after the game. What did it mean to you to see all of your players with these -- overcoming all of these emotions from a coach standpoint and reaching their goal of actually winning the AAC championship?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yeah. I mean, I really think there is a lot of alumni that were here today. And I keep bringing them up because there was no path to win a conference championship. Regular season yes, maybe but UConn was in the league. So last year it opened up. I think and I keep bringing back Masseny and Tay and Diamond because they've been here the longest. We've had a lot of really good teams and really good players, we just couldn't get to this point because UConn was here. So last year it really opened up.

And we felt like we had a chance to win the regular season also. It's just the COVID situation and all the games that were canceled and just everything. I mean, it was tough. We split with USF last year, so we were both really good teams last year. Everybody came back for him, everybody came -- well not everybody came back but everybody came back for us.

So I mean, it was just this slow process of this mountain that we were climbing to get to this point. And I'm just really happy that Tay and Masseny came back, so they could experience this because we worked so hard. We have goals every year to achieve. When you can't get past this level, you can't win a regular season conference championship, and you can't win the tournament championship and, you know, get the ticket to go in the NCAA Tournament, you have to make sure you win a bunch of games just to get an at-large bid. So now really we got both. Hopefully we'll get a really good seed.

It's not over, and I know these three up here know it's not over and they're excited to see who they get to play next. Because that experience last year, they remember that experience too. So we're excited that we got the automatic bid and now we kind of got to wait and see what's next. But we're going to definitely enjoy this because this was

not an easy road. It wasn't an easy road for them. It was an easier road for us coaches because we don't have to run around and get hit and punched and our knees, but they're great human beings. They're great people. We have a really good coaching staff and we really have a lot of great people around us that has helped us get to this point.

But I'm super proud of them. Super happy for them because they've never done this. They've never won a conference championship. So this is what it feels like. This is what all the hard work is for.

Q. And I want to talk about Lish. Obviously she tweaked her knee a little bit in the closing minutes of the fourth quarter and she got right back up and kept going. What can you say about her toughness throughout the entire season?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: She was like, what is that thing, the gun, "I need the gun. I'm cramping up." You don't get to come out you're not coming out so, you know, and because down the stretch -- we've been down the stretch in a lot of games. And usually these four are in. Just depends if it's Desto or Britt. They're usually in and usually we find a way to get Lish the ball because she can make free throws. That's why I'm like, you're not coming out. You can make free throws. Diamond can make free throws. Tay can make three throws and Mass can make free throws. Well, she was 1-for-2.

Lish did a really good job. It was just so physical. She dove on a loose ball. Her knee just kind of, I don't know what you call it, bent. So I'm sure they're going to be nice and sore tonight.

Q. For Mass and obviously Tay, what was said 4:42 to go in the game, two-point game you got the lead. Who spoke up? Because you all took it to a different level there in that 4:42?

TAY SANDERS: Well, we all spoke up. All the captains we were like, defense. If we want this, we've got to play defense, we've got to fight, play together, stick together. Like Diamond was saying, we've got to stick together if we want to win. We're family -- I'm getting emotional -- we're a family. We just like each day, each practice, each game we just became, like, closer and sticking together even when, like, we were down. Like we are sisters. We fight. We argue. But we're always going to stick together, we're going to laugh about it and I don't know. Like we wanted it, so we did it.

Q. Diamond, I'll ask you, how does it feel to have that trophy considering everything you've gone through

last year with the injury and the tournament and overcoming that and coming back?

DIAMOND BATTLES: It's a surreal moment. I really didn't care about the trophy. I just wanted to get these two a championship honestly. Just all the hard work that we put in and the respect that we didn't get. It played a huge factor for us, especially for me, because we deserve so much more. So we just had to come and take it because we knew it wasn't going to be given to us.

Just this trophy means that the hard work that I put in is no more self-doubt for myself. I know I can do it when I put my mind to it. So just having these two supporting me and believing in me and Coach Abe pushing me, it just means a lot. Sorry. It just means a lot. I worked hard for this.

Last year I wasn't -- I didn't get any accolades. So I knew over the summer I had to work. I worked my butt off over the summer. I pushed whoever I could push. I led however I could lead and it got me to this moment, and I couldn't thank my teammates and coaches enough for helping me get to this moment.

Q. Coach, you talked about it earlier, when UConn was in the conference it was them and everybody else. They leave, somebody has to make over the mantle and make that run. Now it's pretty much it's between you all and USF. Are you happy with that or do you want to get back into the mode of I'm going to take charge of this conference? UCF is going to take charge of the conference and become the new UConn in the American?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Well, I don't know -- I think you're asking about the -- we have one more year in the conference. UCF will not be in the conference again. So we'll have one more year to play with USF and Jose. He's a great coach. He's a good friend of mine. I really enjoy how he coaches. He really enjoys the competition with us. And we have talked about it a bunch. But we only have one more year left here in the American. So after that, we'll be going to the Big 12.

Q. Well, somebody has to take over that conference also. Will you be the new team moving in that says step out of the way?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: I'm going to try to enjoy this one.

Q. So this is directed towards the players specifically. Obviously, you know, this is a huge goal for you and now you've punched our ticket to the NCAA championship. So your motto kind of going into the



AAC championship was to stay locked in. What's your motto going into the NCAA championship?

DIAMOND BATTLES: Same thing.

MASSENY KABA: Same thing.

TAY SANDERS: Same thing.

MASSENY KABA: We're never satisfied. Always hungry. Never full.

Q. Ladies, listen, Collin mentioned all the accolades and all that you've accomplished. But how much more sweet is it that you're going to get at least one more game to play with your sisters?

MASSENY KABA: I mean, it's a great feeling. I mean, it's my last game in the American. I've been here for five years. And to know that we can keep on playing in this season. You know, we've got the NCAA Tournament coming up. And it's not fully over, but it's over in the American. But I still get to play one more game with them. And I'm just excited about it.

Q. Coach, a year ago at this time you and I spoke and I remember I asked you what was going through your mind the last seconds. And you talked about how you really wanted to win it badly for your players and you wish you could have done more. What was going through your mind as that clock was ticking there at the end there it went zero and you become the first UCF team to win the conference championship regular season and tournament title in the same year since 1999?

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Well, I don't know. At about a minute, was it, I was going like this to Diamond (winking). I was winking at her, and she was like, What are we in? Are we in white? I was like (winking). I was trying to, like -- because she was still so locked in, Diamond was, because she was walking towards me. And I think Mass was on the foul line. And I was winking at her like we got this. And she was just, What are we in? What are we in?

But, you know, I don't know. I think it was about maybe a minute left and we were -- it was when Desto made those free throws. You know, Desto is not known as being the great free-throw shooter. But when she knocked both of those down, that's when I was like, okay, we're going to finish this off good. That's when I really kind of let up a little bit and was like winking at Diamond saying we got this. But she was ignoring my winks.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you very much,

ladies. Congratulations.

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