

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates
Coach Kim McNeill

Micah Dennis

Synia Johnson

Amiya Joyner

Postgame Press Conference

East Carolina - 46, Houston - 44

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We are joined by East Carolina head coach Kim McNeill, Micah Dennis, Synia Johnson, and Amiya Joyner.

Coach, before we get into questions, would you please give us a few comments about tonight's game?

KIM MCNEILL: It's surreal. Just an unbelievable game by both teams. Both teams fought extremely hard, just the way we did two weeks ago when we went into triple overtime. Very low-scoring game, but both teams really made their money off of their defensive effort.

You know, tougher that somebody had to lose, but I'm glad that we finished on top. And I'm just so happy for this program, so happy for these young women sitting up here to be picked 11th, to be picked 11th, and now we're going to the NCAA Tournament, it's just unbelievable. But I have to give all the credit to them. They've fought and battled, and put up with my mouth and me getting on them and yelling at them. I know at times they probably wanted to tell me to shut up. But I knew we had -- I knew we had talent. I knew we had talent. Obviously inexperience to the fact of playing in this type of environment, and for these young ladies who have never experienced winning, to never experience winning 20 games, to never experience winning one game in a conference tournament to come here and win this today just shows unbelievable resiliency by my team and by my coaching staff.

Q. Coach, very happy for you. It's been a great ride



this year, especially the last few weeks. Can you talk about mental toughness? Mental toughness seems to be something you guys have had, especially this tournament. And I just wanted you to talk about that.

KIM MCNEILL: Yeah, you know, I've been preaching all year to them that, you know, it all starts in practice. And we're still growing in that aspect. I tell them, you know, I'm not a type of coach that believes that when the lights come on we shine. We grind it out in practice every single day, regardless if we just played a game. If we're going to step on the court, we're going to go hard. We know no other way. And this is why we did it to prepare for moments like this.

Coming into this game, I told them, I said, you know, it's going to come down to the team that's the most mentally tough and the most physically tough. Both teams have played three games. Both teams play a very physical defensive style of play. So at this point everything is going to become mental. You know, we scored two points in the first quarter. Two points, you know. But we kept getting stops. We kept rebounding, and we just made some winning plays down the stretch.

Q. Coach, about seven minutes remaining in the first half we were down 13 to 4. Talk about Alexsia Rose coming off the bench, the spark she provided. Back-to-back possessions. She took the ball strong to the basket and made buckets.

KIM MCNEILL: Yeah, Alexsia was huge coming off the bench. To come in in that type of environment with the type of pressure and defense they played to come in and make the plays that she made, you know, broke the press, got to the hole, got an And One, hit a three, played some really good defense, you know. I think this year, not that I think, but I know this is the deepest team that we've had. You know, lycez Adams came off the bench and gave us really good minutes. We knew we were going to have to go to the bench because we had some tired legs out there.

For them to be ready to go, to do whatever they had to do to help us win, just unbelievable.



I'm just so proud of these young women.

Q. Synia, you've been so clutch in this tournament, and I love your game and the fact that you made some big baskets. I tell my son and daughter all the time to drive to the basket. And you're going through defenders, making plays, especially crucial on the first and second quarter in that first half. Can you talk about that?

SYNIA JOHNSON: Yeah, I know, that's what I do, so when they give the ball to me, that's what I'm looking to do. For my teammates, they believe in me to get the ball in that situation, and attack the basket and do what I'm supposed to do, so...

Q. For the student-athletes as well, if each of you could answer this. I'm sure you saw that you were picked 11th in the preseason. You know, a lot of times those predictions aren't far off from where they would be. How was it that you were able to not fall into that trap of believing, you know, what at least what other people thought about you?

MICAH DENNIS: I mean, that gave us motivation. No. 11 to the championships? That's a journey. That is an amazing journey that not a lot of people can talk about. So the fact that we can tell our story, it's amazing.

Q. Coach, any parallels that can be drawn there? You said you had two points in the first quarter, but you held them to 11. Is there any kind of parallel you can draw between overcoming that kind of adversity season long verses sitting there after ten minutes with 2 points on the board?

KIM MCNEILL: That's what we kept telling them. We only scored 2, but they only scored 11. I think we go into halftime down by seven. But we missed some free throws and missed some lay-ups. We told them, keep defending, keep rebounding the ball, keep defending and rebounding the ball, and the ball will fall through the hole. We got some offensive rebounds in the first half. And we kind of chucked it up there instead of taking our time.

I thought we settled down in the second half and just made some plays. The play at the end of the game, you know, when there's so many seconds to go on the clock, 17 seconds or whatever it was, and we get two big stops. That's who we are, and we do it every single day in practice.

You know, we do a segment where defensively we have to get ten stops before the offense scores 12. We only get one point for a stop where the offense gets two or three,

depending on what they score.

We kept saying at the end of the game, this is practice. This is practice. This is the first to ten. We've got to get ten. We've got to get one stop to win this.

So, we're built on defense. You know, when we score the ball really well, that's like an extra, but we're built on defense, and that's how we won the game.

Q. This question is for Amiya. Amiya, talk about the emphasis on rebounding. I know obviously in the game against Memphis, despite the win, outrebounded by 17. Tonight you outrebound Houston 55-47 and you had 15 of those.

AMIYA JOYNER: Yeah, rebounding is what I do. My offensive game wasn't on tonight, so I had to help my team do something. I had to contribute to do something, yeah, besides scoring. Got to score. I'm sorry. I'm just I'm so excited.

KIM MCNEILL: We say that all the time, you know. There's always ways you can help the team. You know, sometimes people get so caught up in scoring the ball, but we preach to our team all the time like there's other ways you can help. You can play defense, you can rebound, you can take charges, you can dive on the floor, you can make winning games.

So we really preach not getting so hung up on the offensive end of the floor, to find other ways, and she's been huge for us all season rebounding the ball. In this tournament, she was definitely huge.

Q. I don't know if you ladies know this or not, but I know you probably know it's the third time in the history of the school to go to the NCAA Tournament, 1982, 2007, and now it's great to say 2023 for you ladies. I don't know if you know this, but it's only the fourth time, I believe, in the history of the school to have a conference tournament. You're part of history. So proud of you and proud of Coach McNeill, Coach Cory, everybody, the whole staff has done such an amazing job coming in.

Four years ago I was on the bandwagon, a lot of people were early on. But I'm sure after tonight there's going to be a lot of people on the bandwagon. It's going to be kind of crowded on that bandwagon.

But I hope there's more people. How about the fans? The fans have really come out this year. I know for you at Williams Arena, Minges Coliseum. Can you talk about the fans? It's blowing up on social media right now, let me tell

you.

KIM MCNEILL: You know, I just, thinking back to those last couple of games, it's just heart-filling. Thinking back to my first year, and I remember specifically playing Memphis at home and coming, you know, two minutes left before we start the game and literally being able to count the amount of people in the gym. It was like 50 people.

You know, we've worked really hard to try to build the attendance up. Because people in the stands help us in more ways than one. When that crowd gets behind us, especially those last couple games, chanting "ECU," "purple and gold." I can't say thank you enough to Pirate Nation for continuing to believe in us.

And then understanding women's basketball at ECU is relevant. It's relevant now. We're here to stay. We are here to stay. This is not the end. This is going to be a tradition from here on out.

Q. Thank you, Coach. Good luck to you ladies in the tournament. And maybe you can bring some more hardware home.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports