

# American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## USF Bulls

## Jose Fernandez

## Aerial Wilson

## Romi Levy

### Postgame Press Conference

South Florida - 69, Wichita State - 62

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Yeah, I told our team, you play in so many of these tournaments, I think the first game's the most important one. Last year with the double bye and being the top seed, we got bounced out in the first round. We're the best team over 16 nights and came here and got beat by a Wichita State team.

So, now instead of winning three, like we had to do in previous years, you got to play four games in four days. So I'm glad we got this one out of the way. I want to give a lot of credit to Wichita State because I thought they were well coached and they did a good job with their scheme offensively attacking certain players on our team. I thought they had a good game plan, especially after such a short prep, one day for us.

Again, I'm also proud of our kids. I think this is three straight games that we've really had to make plays down the stretch. The last three games that we've won, and we won three in a row, have been games where we really had to close out games in the fourth quarter because seven of our eight losses we've been leading with four or five minutes to go and we didn't close out seven games. Our record would be a lot different even if you won half of those.

Aerial Wilson, extremely proud of how she defended and she played today like this could be her last game of her college career. If you want to go out, that's the way that



you want to go out, leaving everything out on the floor. I thought we had good play off the bench with L'or needing to play and I thought she finished around the rim with Ade getting in foul trouble.

We're going to have to do a much better job on the glass, on the defensive glass tomorrow, and we're going to have to shoot the ball much better from the free-throw line. Today was very uncharacteristic for us being -- what are we, No. 1 in the league in free throw shooting. For the most part, I thought we did a very good job taking care of the ball, only had nine turnovers. That's something that we fixed after non-conference play.

But we're going to play really good UTSA team tomorrow. They got good guard play, they play hard, they defend, and interiorly they got two, three guys that finish around the rim and they rebound it. So it's good to get the first one out of the way and now get ready, short turnaround for our next one tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned one of the things you've talked about all season as far as being consistent of attacking teams, both inside and out, but because of injuries, y'all had an up and down season. Just talk about how y'all adjusted to get to this point.**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Well, we have three players on the floor that start for us that this is their first season with us, and they're freshmen and two transfers in Romi and Ade and Vittoria, so I think we have progressed throughout the season, I think we've gotten better.

Again, everyone goes through injuries and definitely when you lose a player like Sammie, you got to play differently, you got to find different things to do offensively and defensively. I think we've done that. I'm very proud of this group, especially, you know, you talked about the injuries, for us to still finish fifth and we're at 19 wins, you're one game away from 20, with the adversity that we've had.

Tomorrow we're going to have to play better, and I think our team knows that, our team understands that. So,

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again, looking forward to -- this is what -- when we got done with non-conference, and we always play a very challenging schedule, same thing I told our kids when we got back on December 26th, that everything's going to come down to Fort Worth. It was going to come down to Fort Worth for everybody in our league. It was going to be a one-bid league. So what we talked about then, everything that we talked about then is still in front of us.

So tomorrow's step number two of four. If we can play well as a unit tomorrow, share the ball, take care of it, get the ball to places we want to get it to on the offensive end, and take good high-percentage shots, I feel good about it.

Now, on the defensive end, we got to -- we're going to have to defend a lot better. Our help side's got to be better, our preparation in regards to personnel has to be a lot better. So hopefully we got the bad game out of a tournament out of the way.

**Q. If you can, also expound about how this league has changed this year on the landscape, new teams coming in, teams leaving. How do you as a coach adjust to that situation just from the bench?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I think I'm glad that our women's basketball program is supported the way that it is, and we charter everywhere we go, to and from. That's just how much our administration values our program, you know, because if we didn't do that, this would be a very tough league to go play games at for the student-athletes competitively. So I'm glad, number one, that our student-athletes and our staff are taken care of in that manner.

We got some really, really good coaches in this conference. I think you look at our record, we didn't do very good with no single games. Again, the pre-season poll, you can throw that one out the window. Tulsa, Temple, and North Texas all shared the regular season championship, but Tulsa was the only team that we played twice, right? I wasn't a proponent of 18 league games. I'm still not a proponent of 18 league games. I think we can play 16 league games, go get you two better net games or schedule two wins. There's a reason why the SEC with 14 teams just plays 16 games.

Our standings would have been all over the place like it was this year, where the final day of the season we could have been fourth or -- we could have been fourth or 10th or 11th, whatever it was. So hopefully, we take a look at that because I think it could help us getting more teams into the NCAA Tournament by getting two more games back in regards to all the programs doing whatever they want with those.

I don't know, maybe we can do a much better job manipulating the NET. That will be a different conversation for another day.

**Q. This is a game where the score was within the margins for much of it. No one was really running away with it. What was the difference down the stretch for you as you navigated the final minutes and pulled away at the end?**

ROMI LEVY: I think at some point Coach said that this is it. If we lose, we go home. We all really realized that this is our time to -- there's no way we're going to lose this game. We all stayed together. Aerial had a great game. She's a senior. That could have been her last game. So I think we all realized that we're not going to lose this game because we have plans to go all the way.

AERIAL WILSON: They really stayed with us the whole game and it was tied towards the end there, so really it's back to 0-0 and we just took it possession by possession. We knew we needed to get a score and a stop, and I think that was the biggest difference-maker, was when we got up, we had to keep getting stops and they sent us to the free-throw line and I think we hit I think the last 4-6 or 6-8. So I would say that was the difference.

**Q. You've been part of the pedigree of this program, a championship team, and have gone through this tournament before. What, if anything, have you shared with your teammates about what it takes to navigate a conference tournament here?**

AERIAL WILSON: Tournament season is completely different than regular season because it's one game and done. So I think that the number one thing that I would be able to share with them is just how you have to go out every single game with great energy and great passion and leave everything out on the court.

**Q. Looking ahead to the matchup with UTSA, what do you expect to see tomorrow against the Roadrunners?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Well, I mean, I have a lot of respect for Karen and her staff. Their kids play hard. They play hard, they're physical, they're tough, and they're well coached. That's what I told our team, we're going to have to really match their physicality and their toughness and we got to really do a great job on the glass.

I'm glad we've got a game under our belt here and we'll start getting ready for them tonight and go through shoot-around tomorrow, and then hopefully we can get to Tuesday and Wednesday, where we can rest some more

and get some later shoot-arounds. That will be nice.

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