

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates

Kim McNeill

Amiya Joyner

Khia Miller

Postgame Press Conference

East Carolina - 55, UTSA - 54

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

KIM McNEILL: Words can't express how I feel right now. Excuse me if I get emotional because I think people, when they think of coaches, they think all we do is coach, but it's so much more than that. I love these young women like they're my own daughters. We've been through a lot this year, a lot, a lot of adversity. People counted us out early when we went down two of our really good guards. Some people had to step up. Some freshmen had to step up and be sophomores very, very early, one being Khia Miller here and the other one being Karina Gordon.

But I can't express right now how proud I am of this team, how proud and honored I am to be the head women's basketball coach of East Carolina. It's hard being a Pirate, but I tell the girls all -- I told 'em in the locker room, you know, when things come hard, it just makes you appreciate the outcome even more. And they're going to appreciate everything we've gone through this year. God let's you do things for a reason. They're putting us through this to make these young women stronger get better.

But what a game. I mean, UTSA, what a team. They're young too, so they're going to be really, really good in this league for years to come. Karen is an unbelievable coach. She's been around women's basketball for a really, really long time. I definitely respect her and what she's doing. But they got a lot of good players down there. This is a hard one for anybody to lose. It's a heartbreaker. But this is March, March Madness, and this is what it's all about.



But I just can't express how proud and how happy I am for ECU, for Greenville, and for Pirate Nation.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Coach, thank you.

Questions?

Q. How does it feel to be in the finals two years in a row and one win away from the Big Dance again?

KIM McNEILL: This is what I came here to ECU to do, to put women's basketball on the map in Greenville. I've got two young women right here that were top-100 recruits in the country that could have chosen to go somewhere else, but they chose to come to ECU and this is what they came here for to be, to play in big games like this, to play for championships. It's exciting. It's an exciting time. I'm so happy.

I don't know if last year felt better or this year with all the adversity we went through this year with all the injuries and stuff, and just different things we've gone through, but it feels really, really good.

Q. This thing I feel like maybe could have slipped away from you guys at some times. The second quarter comes to mind. But I guess what did it take to put yourselves in that position to mount that comeback that you guys did in the second half of the fourth quarter?

KIM McNEILL: Every huddle we came into we just kept telling the young ladies to believe, to keep defending, keep defending. Our shots wasn't falling like it had been the last couple of games, but we are a firm believer that if you defend and rebound and share the ball, you got a chance to win in tournament play. And everyone knows our identity is defense. That's our identity, that's how we win games. When we play good defense, we got great opportunity to win.

But we just came in those huddles every single time I could hear Mi-Mi's voice, I could hear Khia's voice just encouraging each other in those huddles, just trying to

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stick together and coming up with stops and coming up with rebounds, and we had some key stops, Morgan with a big charge, Karina with a big three in the corner, Mi-Mi with blocks. You could go down the line on different things that different people did in order to help us win this game. It was a total team effort tonight.

Q. I'd like to get your take and also Khia's take, it was obvious UTSA was going to do everything they could to take Danae away, running two people at her, sometimes three. How early on did you know that others would have to step up and how important was it for Khia and others to step up in that manner?

KIM McNEILL: The last three or four games we've had two or three people in double figures, and these last two games we've had four people in double figures, which has been great. Most people will look at this stat sheet and say, Danae McNeal, only 11 points, and ECU still won?

At the end of the day, that's how I want my program to be built. It was key for -- Khia's been playing well for the last couple weeks. This is what I thought she could do when she decided to come to ECU. Sometimes it just takes freshmen a little bit longer. It took her a little bit longer to build her confidence in herself and know that she belongs here and that she can be a threat to us. I think she has a great career ahead of her for the next three years here at ECU.

But Mi-Mi, oh, I think that's the hardest I've seen her play, diving on the floor for loose balls, coming up with big plays, scoring down the stretch when we needed her to score. So just a great effort by these two.

Q. Going off of that, Khia, five out of the last six games scoring in double figures. What's kind of changed for you in the last maybe month or so?

KHIA MILLER: My coaches have just been telling me to focus on two things, and that was confidence on offense and solid defense, and I just keep that in my head, and they just keep reminding me, be solid on defense, have confidence on offense, and I just keep that in my head. And honestly, I just want to do anything I can do to help our team win. I don't really care if it's points, rebounds, stops, just talking. I don't care if I'm on the bench leading every cheer. I just want us to win the game.

Q. For the players, all the adversity you guys have faced this year, how much do y'all feel like going through all that helped you guys in terms of when you were down tonight, not being out of the fight and always knowing you would come back?

KHIA MILLER: I just think it was a growing pain that we had to go through. Adversity is something that you have to go through to become a better player, become a better team, and that's what we had to go through. Coach Kim always tells us that we wanted to play our best basketball right now, and I think that's what's going on, we're playing our best basketball right now, and that adversity just helps us get to this point.

Q. Coach, can you sort of see this team gelling? I know that's what kind of people say, hey, they're gelling, they're playing well together at this time. But is there anything specific that you've noticed that's kind of led to this charge at the end of the season?

KIM McNEILL: This is a very unique team. I can tell you that. With a lot of personality. A lot of personality. Probably the most personality that I've ever coached. But they're fun. They're fun. I think it's a good mixture of returnees that has been here before and then some new guys that just wanted to come in and play hard and do whatever we got to do.

But I think, yeah, here lately our season has been like this. It's been up and down. We go on a five-game winning streak, then we lose two or three in a row, we go on a two-game winning streak, then lose three or four in a row, and a big word we always use is consistency, and being consistent in practice is still something we haven't figured out yet.

But I think our focus has really been here this week and I think the returnees being here and going through what they did last year gave them confidence that we can come in here and do it again.

Q. The other game tonight, looking at it with Temple and Rice, familiar with both opponents, just your thoughts on the game and getting the chance at least to sit back and watch that knowing you're in the title game.

KIM McNEILL: Yeah, both of those teams are really good. I said earlier to the girls, all the teams that have made it up to this point are really, really good. So whether it's Rice, whether it's Temple, we just, short turn around, our biggest thing right now is we got some really tired legs, playing four games in four days, it's going to be tough, so we got to figure out a way to get our legs back and rest. The game plan won't change. We are who we are. Defensively, we got to continue to defend, rebound and share the ball, and make layups and make free throws tomorrow.

Q. For the players, just your thoughts about playing in the championship game, especially such a young



team?

KHIA MILLER: I'm super excited. Coming into East Carolina that's where I wanted to be at the end of the day. At the end of the season I wanted to be in the championship. I'm so happy we got to get here, and I don't care about what anything happen previously, any other games, at the end of the day we're going to the championship and that's what we got to focus on now.

AMIYA JOYNER: This is why I chose to come to East Carolina, to win championships and...

KIM McNEILL: To leave your legacy.

AMIYA JOYNER: And leave my legacy.

THE MODERATOR: All right, coach, thank you very much.

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