

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates

Kim McNeill

Danae McNeal

Tatyana Wyche

Postgame Press Conference

Rice - 61, East Carolina - 41

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: I'm extremely proud to sit up here and say that I'm the head coach of ECU women's basketball. I love these young women as if they were my own, my own daughters. As I said yesterday, people don't realize that coaching has so much more to do than X's and O's. It's about teaching 'em life lessons and tonight was a life lesson for us that we will learn from, we will grow from, we will take that with us out into the real world and understand how to manage adversity.

Tonight wasn't our best performance. But I'm proud of the run that we made. Our season has been up and down all year long, just dealing with a lot of adversity. For us to get to this point, I'm extremely proud, but not happy with the performance that we did tonight because of how hard we fought these last three games. We didn't fight as hard as we could have tonight. But extremely proud to be the head coach here, excited about our future, excited to give these girls a couple weeks off and to get back going to work on some things that we need to work on to make sure that we're back here next year.

But we're not here with tears. We're here with tears of joy and happiness that we're going to get back here and win a championship next year. Rice is a great team, played extremely hard, hit some big shots, they managed our runs. We made some runs and they stopped 'em and got back on pace, so congratulations to them. But I can't continue to reiterate how proud I am to be the head



women's basketball coach at ECU.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

Questions, please.

Q. Congrats on making the championship two years in a row and how tough is it to play four games in four days and keep that level of intensity?

KIM McNEILL: It's hard. This year was supposed to be my deepest bench that I've had thus far. So when Micah and Synia went down, that made two freshmen have to step in and play that I was depending on coming off the bench and letting our bench be more productive and have more depth on the bench.

But, you know, it happens, it's sports. You can't make excuses. As I said before, we had some really good runs this year. I still told the girls when those two went down that we still had an opportunity to win, that we still had an opportunity to compete for a championship, and we did that. We got here three games in a row and did the style of play that we play. Playing four games in a row is tough, but, heck, Rice did it too. They had to play four games in a row too, so it's no excuse. But just life lessons, we'll learn from, and we'll be back here next year.

Q. You just mentioned the big word for this week, toughness of this league. If you can, expound on how hard it is not to just win at home or on the road, but having to deal with night-in and night-out not knowing if your players are going to -- all your players that you need will be healthy to finish out?

KIM McNEILL: Yeah, we dealt with that too. We went on a five-game win streak where we were playing some of our best basketball, played Charlotte at home and beat 'em really bad, and Taty goes out in the third quarter. Then we go down to Rice without her and then her twin sister gets hurt in the second quarter. So our lineup has changed all year long with injuries, sickness, whatever the case may be. So it's just been a lot of adversity the whole year long. But that's a part of sports. It's a part of being an athlete, you know, learning how to deal with adverse situations.

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When you got to play four games in a row, you know, it's a toughness factor, it builds character. I thought we had a stage that when we kind of went on a run and then we got -- they hit a couple big shots, we hung our heads a little bit, but as I said before, we'll be back here next year. We'll be back.

Q. The other point of emphasis, the droughts that y'all had this evening, it was like it was one-, two-minute, because every team in this league, especially this week, we saw a lot of that, those type situations, but y'all had one long drought, I think it was over two minutes long in between points. What did you talk to the girls about in a timeout to a keep their head in the game?

KIM McNEILL: We got off to a slow start. We only scored three points in the first quarter. That's tough. When you get down, you get yourself in a hole and you got to dig out a 15-, 16-point deficit. But the message was the same in every timeout, continue to fight, continue to get stops. We are a defensive-minded team, so just continue to reiterate on defending and limiting to them to one shot and seeing if we can get out in transition and create some offense for us.

Q. I'm sure it's tough to sum up, but the taking Danae out in the final minute, that moment seemed pretty emotional. Just can you walk us through that, the emotions of that?

(Pause.)

KIM McNEILL: Well, that being her last game in an ECU uniform is kind of hard to swallow. She's meant so much to this program, so much to my family, so much to Pirate Nation. She's helped put this program on the map, and I will forever be grateful for everything she's done for this program. She will go down as one of the best Pirates. It's just a hard pill to swallow.

Q. Switching gears there, but you guys hung with them for the final three quarters. I mean, basically pretty much even. So how much does that opening quarter hurt and just trying to dig out of that hole kind of throughout the game after that?

KIM McNEILL: It looked a little bit like last year except Houston wasn't scoring either in that first quarter, whereas this year Rice was scoring and we wasn't. So we're not a team that can get that far behind. We can get seven or eight or ten points, but to get down 15, 16 points is kind of tough for us, especially when we're not shooting the ball that well from the outside.

So that was hard to come out to dig out of that hole. Rice, they kept their foot on the pedal and kept hitting open threes and it's hard when you dig yourself that big of a hole in tournament play.

Q. I know obviously this is a tough moment and an emotional moment, but there's a lot of wins that come along the way. When you reflect on this season on and off the court, what are some of those victories that you feel this Pirates team has accomplished, in your mind?

KIM McNEILL: Yeah, I think once Micah and Synia went down, I don't think anybody thought we would be sitting here today competing for a championship. It gave a lot of young kids an opportunity to play. You look at our starting lineup, we've got two freshmen, a sophomore, a junior in Taty, she's a junior in class, but this is probably the most she's played in her career and the biggest impact she's had to have in her career. So she's still kind of youthful to being out there on the floor too. And then we have one fifth year senior.

So we got a lot of kids -- a lot of young kids that got a lot of experience that's going to make them better sophomores next year, and then we've got three kids on the bench that will be back next year that will bring some leadership and some experience. So you look at all those young kids that got that experience this year that was able to play in this environment, that were able to play for a championship, and then what we got returning that's been injured, the future's bright. But we just got to learn from a lot of mistakes and things that we made this year that we, kind of like self wounds that we did that allowed, that made us finish ninth. Like, we're not the ninth best team in this league, obviously. We should have been higher in the league. But everything that happened was on us and we got to learn from it, we got to grow from it, we got to have a really good off-season, just working on some things. But I think the biggest thing is just the experience that some of these young kids got that are going to be returning next year.

Q. To the student-athletes, just what you can say about what you've taken away from this season and the fact that you aren't, obviously, like Coach said, the ninth best team in the AAC, and just how you showed that in these last four days.

DANA McNEAL: I just feel like what I took from it was just fighting through adversity, no matter what. Like Coach said, losing Synia and Micah, it wasn't ideal, but we pushed through it and that's what got us here.

Q. Tatyana, this is for you. I wanted to ask you about,

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throughout the year, I know this was your first year here, throughout the year Coach has been challenging you all year to kind of step up, and over the past couple months, maybe even the last half of the season, you've been really dominant. What's that like kind of growing into that role and really kind of embracing this team and getting to where you guys are today?

TATYANA WYCHE: I mean, it was a great feeling. Thank you to the coaches for trusting me and putting me in this position. It's obviously not easy going into the portal, so, very scary. But getting here and being where we are now, it's a great feeling making it to the championship, at least.

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

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