

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

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Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

USF Bulls

Jose Fernandez

Carla Brito

Vittoria Blasigh

Mama Dembele

Postgame Press Conference



days.

So I'm happy for them. This is something that they're going to remember for the rest of their lives. You win championships in what you do in the off-season, what you do in the weight room, what you do outside of working with the coaches. And it's a credit to them. So I'm very happy that they were resilient after the month of November and December, and they found a way to finish the job and that's what they did.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions.

Q. As you mentioned yesterday, you've been to the NCAA a lot of times. You've also been on the wrong side of the bubble a lot of times and waited to see your name not come up. As you're out there and you have a team that you said took care of business and you know that you did it, what sort of things run through your mind about not only the journey of this season, but the fact that you have a team that got it done tonight?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I felt good after we won last night. And the way that they carried themselves all day today, we weren't going to lose. I've coached enough basketball games that you get that feeling. You know what's going to happen. Credit Rice. I mean, we're up 15. They cut it down to five, six. But different guys made plays. Sammie made free throws, Vicki hit those two free throws, Mama went to the line, Carla was relentless defending on rebounding.

We shot the ball good tonight too, better than we did the previous two nights. But you get that feeling, you kind of know what's going to happen if we don't beat ourselves.

Q. For the players, how does it feel to be going to the NCAA Tournament and winning the conference tonight?

MAMA DEMBELE: It feels really good. We've been working for this all year long and to finally get the reward just feels amazing. We did it as a team. You know, it's just

USF - 69, Rice - 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: Well, first, I want to give Lindsay and the Rice Owls -- congratulate them on the season and how hard they play and they play the right way. Last year they played four games in four days and won this thing. We were up and they just wouldn't go away. So I want to congratulate them and the season that they have had and the job that Lindsay does.

So, there's a lot of people to thank. I want to thank my athletic director, Michael Kelly. My support administrator, Lee Butler. When you win something like this, there's so many people to thank that are just invested and involved. We work with two incredible individuals that work with our team in Lucas Jayden and also Chad Brown. But I have a wonderful staff, our graduate assistants, our managers, our male practice players. I remember after last season, selection day our name was going to be called. We have worn Amir's initials on our sleeve and on our uniforms all year, and I know he's looking from above, and he's very happy about this group of young ladies.

So this is a special group, a special group that had to win three games in three days. There was a lot of disappointment, us losing on the road at Tulsa and then losing at home to East Carolina and playing ourselves out of the at-large conversation. So I think they came to Fort Worth with a purpose and it showed. It showed all three

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bigger than any individual in that locker room. We care about each other, we play for each other, and we proved it on the court, so I just can't be more proud of this team and everything we've done and now we just have to look ahead and see what is in front of us. As I said, we respect everyone, but we fear nobody, so we're ready.

VITTORIA BLASIGH: Yeah, I mean, I'm so happy. Like, I really wanted to win this conference tournament. And I mean, now we have to play the March Madness, which is amazing and, as Mama said, like, we're going to play and try to fight and win.

CARLA BRITO: I mean, from the beginning, we say this is the last chance that we have to go to March Madness, so this team is working really, really hard and, like what they said, the work is not done, so we're going to go there and fight for everything.

Q. Vicki and Mama, Carla is the MVP of this tournament. Can you both describe what Carla means to this team, what she brings to you guys?

VITTORIA BLASIGH: I mean, Carla is an amazing teammate. She really work hard every day. Like, I always see her in the weight room doing extra and on the court. She really care about each other. Like, she's amazing. So proud of her.

MAMA DEMBELE: She means everything for this team. I think she's the glue. She's the person that brings that energy every day. You look at her face, you don't know if she's having a good game or a bad game because she doesn't care. She cares so much about all of us. We're going to care about her too.

To finally get the reward and get this award is everything she deserves, so I'm so proud of her. And even if you didn't have it, you're my MVP, so... (laughing).

Q. There was a game last February where you guys took a loss and Carla was frustrated, and I just looked at her, and you just kept coaching her hard. You kept coaching her. It was a rough year last year and to see her now be the MVP, can you just talk about her just willingness to stay with it and how that's such a great example for maybe tough times don't last but tough people do?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Yeah, she had a tough year last year and she knew she did, but she took responsibility and was accountable. She's in the gym all the time. She's always doing extra. She doesn't take plays off. She let's me coach her. And when a player let's a coach coach her and coach her hard and demand from her, there's a reason why

she does what she does.

So we've got three guys on this team that's played in an NCAA tournament, J, Carla, and Sammie. So I'm really happy that the rest of these guys are going to be able to experience that. So now the next thing is -- what is this, NCAA tournament 9? 10? They got an opportunity to do something that this program's never done before and that's played in the second week end. So we'll find out what seed we are. But we're going to continue to play basketball. We're going to enjoy a little bit of time off and then find out who we play.

Q. You won't find me on mute too often, will you guys? (Laughing.) Coach, I'm going to pick up a little bit on your last answer. Are you hoping that winning this tournament and your non-conference schedule gets you off that 8, 9 line in the bracket?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: You know, I think the two losses at the end of the season, because they were outside the top 100, are going to hurt. So we won't be an 8 or a 9. But we're in the NCAA Tournament. We'll figure it out, find out who we play, and we'll be prepared. I'll tell you right now, if we get somewhere around a 12 or 13, if I was a 4 or a 5, I wouldn't want to play us. I'll tell you right now, I would be upset if they had to play us.

Q. For all three of you, you're playing a Rice team that you had beaten twice, but they had won seven games in a row in the tournament, and they were looking -- they didn't look like a team that was that lower seed. What went through your mind before the game to get ready to play this one to win that championship?

VITTORIA BLASIGH: We know that Rice played good all the tournament, so we stayed together pretty much all the game and that's what helped us the most and we won this way.

MAMA DEMBELE: I think the main idea for us was to throw the first punch and just to continue to punch. Even if they came back, to just stay resilient and stay together. We knew they were going to make a run. They're a heck of a team. They proved it the whole tournament. So it was a difficult game, of course, but I think we have so many weapons and at any moment any person can score and that's what we proved. We're an unselfish team and that's how we got the game.

Q. One more. Go ahead.

CARLA BRITO: Yeah, Rice played really, really good. They have been doing really, really good in the tournament. And like, last night, we had been talking, like,

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it's going to be a tough game, physical, but, like, everyone show up to it, and I'm really proud of all of them, so really happy.

Q. This was a real up-and-down season for you. Is this the best coaching job you may have done in the 25 years there at USF?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I don't know. Every team's different. I've enjoyed coaching this group -- enjoyed coaching this group so much. We had snowball fights, we played dodgeball. Carla knocked me out to tear my ACL MCL meniscus --

CARLA BRITO: You had to add that.

JOSE FERNANDEZ: -- but I've enjoyed this group tremendously.

Q. They got the lead down to five there, and we know Mama, how aggressive she is getting others involved and defensively, but offensively, how important was her aggression at the end of the game to lead you through the finish?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Yeah, when they made that run, I think we were able to take a timeout, settle us down, and get the ball where we needed to get to. But when she gets downhill, she was definitely much more aggressive and then people collapsed, and she found our post players. But it was great to see her get to the free-throw line and also knock down free throws. So I mean, our kids knew what was at stake, so great job.

MAMA DEMBELE: Thank you.

Q. What you can say about the trail to get here because obviously a championship is not won in a few days. It's won over the entire season. So just what can you say about the journey itself and maybe some of those moments along the journey that made you feel like you could have this moment.

JOSE FERNANDEZ: The journey started in the summer and it went into the fall, and we went through individual workouts and team workouts and had two scrimmages. Our kids knew that we were going to be challenged. I think we had some -- we got tested, had some adversity. We went to UConn and they beat us. We made some mistakes to close the half. I mean, we battled against South Carolina. Louisville was a game on a neutral floor where we let that one slip away. Same as the Mississippi State game. The TCU game was an outlier because we played our second unit a lot in the second half.

But I mean, then how we finished off the non-conference play beating Duke at home who just won the ACC. And then you go into league play. And I told our guys, and I know Courtney did a voiceover the other day, we're going to get -- we get everybody's best punch because of how successful we've been in this conference. It's tough to do, right? When teams beat us, it's like they just won a national championship. We film their celebration, right, because it means so much to them. And that's what these guys don't understand, a lot of the previous teams that, you know, how hard other teams play is what teams before this team have done. So I'm glad that they responded to the challenge, especially losing two games to come in here. I think that we only trailed 2-0, right, to Tulane? After that we led every, after that 2-0, we led every minute of this entire tournament.

Q. To the student-athletes, to kind of go off of that what Coach said, just what this journey has meant for you individually this season, to do it together, and the way that you've done it, just kind of the culture that you've had and that resolve that you've had to handle what you need to handle, knowing that, like Coach said, everyone's giving you their best game thinking that it's a championship game if they go against you and they win.

MAMA DEMBELE: I think the journey has been full of ups and downs. It was difficult at the beginning, we didn't really know each other and those relationships weren't really built. But the moment we realized we care about each other, we love each other, I feel like it's been just like going up. You see the people on the court, but the people on the bench, they're amazing, they bring the energy every single time. When our head is down they're the first one to put our head up. When we're sore they ask us, What do you need, what do you need from me. So I feel like it's the whole team. Like there's so many things that others don't see, and I wish they were in that locker room to see it. But we feed off each other and we care so much that we don't care who has the night to shine, we're just going to let that person shine. I think that's what talks so much and so good about us and how we made it to this day and to win this championship. It's a win for everyone. For the scout players, for us, for the physical therapists, everyone, everyone has contributed, and this is why South Florida is such an amazing team, and that's why people shouldn't want to play us. And that's all I got to say.

Q. Mama, number one, you look at all the different reasons why you won this game, one that certainly stands out is the assists. You shared the ball. 17 assists, eight for you, people assisted you. Speak about just how you guys work together and kept the ball moving tonight.



MAMA DEMBELE: We just look at the person that was hot in the moment and we just went for that person. Vickie at the given moment, she was just scoring, so we look for her. Sammie was making her shots, Carla too, and there was a moment it was me. And as I said, like, we don't really care who it is, we just go with it. And Coach will say, Just trust those players, and somehow they always work. But he's always right. So I think that's what we believed, we believe in him and what he had to call, and we just executed every single moment and we got the result we wanted. Today I scored, next time maybe I score zero, I don't really care about that, it's about making everyone happy on my team. And if it's assisting, getting steals, that's what I'm going to do.

Q. You played four years at Missouri, you played in three WNITs, you made a leap of faith to come play your last year at USF. How does it feel to have that rewarded with your first NCAA Tournament?

MAMA DEMBELE: When I got here he told me we're going to go to an NCAA tournament, and I told him I believed him. Here we are. So I'm the happiest person alive right now (laughing).

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