

Mountain West Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Air Force Falcons

Coach Chris Gobrecht

Kamri Heath

Nikki McDonald

Postgame Press Conference

San Jose State 62, Air Force 51

THE MODERATOR: Joining Coach Gobrecht with student-athletes Kamri Heath and Nikki McDonald. We'll have an opening remark about today's game, Coach.

CHRIS GOBRECHT: Well, I thought San Jose State really earned that win, and, you know, there's a part of me that is very happy for them in a lot of ways.

We have been in San Jose State's shoes, and we know how special that is to do something like come into a conference game and -- or come into a tournament game and get a W.

So, good for them. Good for them the way they kept believing all year and just kept working and just kept improving all the time.

I just, I give them a lot of credit. Yeah, there were a lot of things that didn't go well for us today certainly, but I just would not want to be taking anything away from San Jose State and, you know, just how hard those kids worked. Them being able to have that kind of a season and continue to improve and get better because, that's what it's all about.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Nikki, I'll start with you. On the boards, you know, obviously that was their intent was to come out here and do this. How difficult was it to combat what they were trying to throw at you when it came to just rebounding?



NIKKI McDONALD: That's something we struggled with all season. It's been an emphasis for us.

But at the end of the day it's why we lost the game. That's why our season came to an end, so it was very frustrating because we were harping on it. Every single person on the floor was saying box out, and yet, every time someone just let their person slip by.

It was extremely frustrating.

Q. As you looked at the tournament coming into it, you battled obviously to get the No. 7 seed, and you knew how things laid out after this. How much emphasis did you put on this game knowing it would be the tough one to get through before things could open up?

NIKKI McDONALD: Yeah, we put a lot. Coach was saying Sunday is going to be the hardest game because it's the first game of the tournament. You're on the big floor, the big lights, and we have a young team who has honestly never seen the minutes at this level.

So it was this game that we were worried about, and it got us.

Q. As a senior walking out, and I'll ask you the same thing, Kamri, how proud are you that you were in this position to where you were the favored team in the Mountain West tournament where you would have come into Air Force never having been in this position at all? Are you able to have that kind of reflection already, or is that going to come later?

NIKKI McDONALD: Yeah, I mean, I see it. It was a long way from freshman year, but even when I was a freshman, the talent we had on the team, like, I thought we should be up there with the best of them, so I never really considered us the bottom of the barrel.

Q. What did it do to the mentality when Jo went out?

NIKKI McDONALD: That was tough. I mean, Jo probably plays the most minutes on the team the whole season, so



she's kind of our glue. She finds people when they have their shot, so it was tough to play without our point guard, but we could have pulled it through, and we didn't.

Q. How difficult is it, you know, to see a career come to an end?

NIKKI McDONALD: Yeah, it's tough. I don't think it's hit me yet, so...

Q. Kamri, some of the same questions. First of all, without Jo, how does that change what you guys run offensively, defensively, just the flow of the game?

KAMRI HEATH: You could see in the second quarter we were scrambling to get some offense going, especially because we didn't have Taylor either because she had two fouls.

So we had me, Maddie, and Milahnie trying to figure out who is going to be point guard, and it took a little bit. It took us until probably the second half to even figure that out.

Hopefully, you know, we are able to fix that in the future. I guess that's not for me, but for them, but, yeah (laughing).

Q. Jo going out and so many things in that first half, I mean, you scored 14 points, how frustrating is it that on this stage you have one of those days where everything seems to be going wrong?

KAMRI HEATH: Yeah, super frustrating because you've played all year long, and then 14 points, it's like, I've scored more than 14 points myself in a half. It's just like how do we get that to work? It was one of those days.

Q. How hard was it to keep focus on this matchup, you know, knowing, again, the whole season was about seeding and can you get the bye, and then okay, you don't get the bye, can you get UNLV on the other side? All these other things going into it, and then you have to focus on a team you've already beaten twice. How hard was it to click into that gear?

KAMRI HEATH: I mean, we were super excited with how things played out. I think we were really pumped to actually get the setup that we did.

I do think we focused on San Jose. I just -- I'm not sure. I can't pinpoint what exactly happened, but I want to say we focused on San Jose coming into the game.

Q. Can you put into context what it's like to leave Air Force in a game where you guys were upset, which,

again, is just a strange thing to say for Air Force basketball, or how much pride you have in getting yourselves to that point?

KAMRI HEATH: Yeah. You have to look at the big picture, right? It wasn't just this game that defines our careers. You know, throughout our time here we went from a losing season to go into WNIT last year and so many different milestones throughout our careers here. I think we need to be proud of that for sure.

This one, I mean, as people we can learn from it. Like just how you approach anything, how you approach a meeting in the future or, you know, different things like that, so we can still learn from it, but at the same time, don't let this be the one defining characteristic of our career.

THE MODERATOR: Very good, ladies. Thank you. You're excused. We'll continue on with Coach Gobrecht.

Q. We saw the team change last year when Jo came in and took over, and then to lose her of all people in a game like this where there was so much trapping going on and everything else, how critical was that?

CHRIS GOBRECHT: I felt all year that Jo was the player that we could least afford to lose. It was under the circumstances of allowing them to have the fast start, which clearly I need to work on my pregame talk or something, because I felt that that start had a great deal to do with the tenor of the game and the fact that we were -- you know, it gave them a lot of confidence.

Here they are in a position of feeling very good about themselves. I mean, they were hitting threes and shots that we haven't really seen them hit before. So they're in that state of mind, and then the most valuable player on our team goes down.

If I'm them, I'm feeling pretty good now (laughing), you know? So it was just -- it was a lot. I thought I was proud of how they battled to get back into it. I think that Kamri said it best. You know, we shouldn't let a game where we probably performed just -- even with the loss of Jo we're capable of better, but we shouldn't allow that game to define really sort of what the season has been and they've done -- I would say that 98% of the time this team played about as well as they could possibly play and they were just -- it's just that our margin of error was practically zero.

So if things didn't go right and if we weren't able to get, you know, shots to fall or, you know, we had to have -- we had to take care of a lot of areas of the game in order to have a chance to win the game in a year when the conference was loaded with veteran players.

Even San Jose State has a whole lot more players that have played Division I than we do. So I think that we want to take -- as I told the team in the locker room, I hope it stings enough that it motivates the level of change and growth that's necessary for us to take the next step, you know, to rise out of just being okay with, you know, .500 types and being in the middle of the pack and that sort of thing, and to have a standard of excellence that takes us up to the upper division all the time.

I hope it stings enough, because there are a whole lot of things we have to do that is hard to do at the Academy, and you have to have that motivation level to do it. There's a reason you miss shots. It's because you're not practicing it. You know, it's very difficult when you know when everybody else in the country is in there for hours, in the gym putting in a time, and we have a very hard time having our players put the time in.

This is the type of thing maybe it stings enough that you say, okay, we have to come up with a plan, a significant change in routine so that we can allow ourselves to not be so deficient in an area that we can do something about because I do think there's more good shooters on this team.

We could have the most talented team Air Force has had next year, and that's fully my expectation that we will have the most talented team we've ever had next year, but we still have to get in the gym and get shots up if we're going to make them.

Then, you know, the size -- but we weren't very big last year either and we won 19 games and our starting center was 5'11". So where there's a will there's a way. Our team defense has to grow a lot. It's not there.

You know, that group last year, they weren't there either when they were all freshmen and sophomores. They weren't playing that defense either, and these guys, you know, they learned a lot, but they're not there. They're not at the level that our defense requires, and we will get there.

Q. One other thing I'll ask. You played that tough schedule, and you talked a lot about giving up pounds and inches time and time again. Would you have hoped that that would have paid more dividends this time of year, that they would have learned some coping mechanisms to pass that that they maybe didn't show tonight?

CHRIS GOBRECHT: Yeah, I honestly do. I mean, that was part of the reason for playing that schedule, but it wasn't the only reason, and I will continue to harp on and

challenge the rest of my conference coaches, conference -- the rest of the coaches in my conference to play schedules like that, because your seventh place team shouldn't be playing that schedule. Your first place team should be playing that schedule and your second place and your third place team should be playing that schedule.

In some ways it was sort of me saying, hey, come on, everybody, this is what our conference needs, because I honestly believe that our first or second place team would have won some of those games, a few of those games that we played. We just weren't quite good enough to beat those guys, but I think there are teams in this conference that would have.

So it was kind of me trying to do the right thing and model and let our players have a great experience and let them go out and see what it's like to play in the Big 12 and the PAC-12 and the Big Ten and to go out and play those kind of opponents, because this is about their experience. They only get to do this for four years. You know, at Air Force you only get to do it for four years if you are lucky, and they deserve those kinds of experiences.

It had a lot more to do with that than me saying, dog gone it, if we do this, I think we're going to be ready to beat, you know, so and so (laughing).

I wish I was that strategic, Brent, to tell you the truth, but I think it's more of a heart thing than anything.

And we're going to do it next year too.

Q. What is the early prognosis on Jo?

CHRIS GOBRECHT: I think until we get an MRI we don't know. It's hard to say. You know, you never want to -- until you get the MRI, you never really want to say.

I mean, we hope it's not obviously structural, but you never know until you see the MRI. You know, whatever she did it was major, because Jo has played 37 minutes a game for how many games this year, and she doesn't -- she's a tough kid. She doesn't go out easily.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much for your time.

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