

Washington Mystics Media Conference

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Coach Sydney Johnson

Media Conference



Q. Before we get into some big picture stuff, I'm curious, like today, how have you decided to run today as far as I assume it's kind of exit interviews? Do you hold all your exit interviews today? Do you lay out an off-season plan for each individual? How do you approach this last day where you're going to get everybody come through the office real quick?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, some organizations do them all in one day. Sometimes you -- right now I think we're on today, tomorrow and the next day is our cadence. Some organizations will do 15, 20 minutes and call it a day. We're doing a little bit longer than that and giving some feedback, taking more feedback than giving.

I know myself and Jamila are meeting with folks, but we have our players but then we also have our medical and performance, and Jamila has laid out a nice program for us, have our assistant coaches weighing in in terms of some feedback for the players that I'm share with them but will also come directly from position coaches as well.

That's pretty much the way we're approaching it, and like I said, in my approach, and I think my colleagues in the building are -- J and our staff, trying to receive as much as give out because frankly, that's kind of how we roll.

We certainly have an idea of what we're looking to do and what our culture is and our development is taking the lead, but we also want to hear back. That's generally how it's been playing out.

Yeah, to confirm, we're coming off a few, and we'll head back to one more before we close out the day.

Q. The way obviously you're receiving more than you give back, but in that part of give back, is it a kind of a whole off-season plan? Are we kind of talking about as specific as workouts and where are you going to be and that kind of stuff, or does that stuff get evolved, or do you have that lined up already?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, so we've had some initial conversations already in terms of where everybody is going to be. Obviously we have three players going overseas, then we have our Unrivaled folks and our Athletes Unlimited folks, so we have a general sense of that.

Not sure if you're aware as much, but we do have some off-season training that we've scheduled for our athletes that we're super excited about. So kind of launching that and getting to know where everyone is going to be and if they're going to be able to partake, and then as a staff, we'll exhale a little bit.

But we've already been taking a million notes in terms of what our focus is going to be for each individual player within that, and then also us as a team. As we want to triple down on how much we want to get them better, we also frankly -- I don't ever think that player development should be divorced from how you want to play in concert with others, so whether that's 3-on-3, I don't wear that hat a lot or wave that flag, but just your one-on-one skills in the gym don't really mean a lot if you can't marry it to four other players.

Just all that stuff, I almost feel like getting ready for a season. We have a lot to do that we're going to be excited about once we exhale a little bit.

Q. Knowing that you haven't gotten a chance to exhale at all, but as you look back on season one for you, season one of this new culture that you guys are putting together, what has kind of stood out to you or what will you remember the most about just the path that you guys took from constructing this roster, their journey of development, the ups and downs and finally getting to this last point where you guys wrapped everything up?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, I think we feel like, look, we understand where we are in terms of not having more games to play. Our season is finished; other teams will be fighting for a championship. Eight teams, and we're not one of them.



In terms of what we talked about, what we're standing on and really prioritizing our culture and our development, I'm not a betting man. I'm not a teacher handing out grades, but I really like where we are. We talked about trying to go through a 44-game season and be true to what we said we were going to be, which is a hardworking team, a team that embraced getting better, to be direct with each other, to be humble, to be joyful. Like real talk. You can ask our players, we finished on a really tough slide, and it didn't feel like people were coming into the gym ready to flip this whole thing upside down. It was no, like let's hold to our habits.

Our culture was rock solid. I just met with Jade earlier today, and she mentioned -- I'm going to try to capture her words, when she talked about our culture being so strong. She's like, Coach, one sign of that is like when you know you're off a bit in terms of your culture, everybody feels it. So when I kept referring to these games, New York and Golden State in the middle of our tough streak and we were so not who we have aimed to be, we were so not competitive, no not connected, and the fact that we all felt it. It wasn't just a coach who was upset by the score; that was like the least of it.

To me, that is such a strong signal for what we've been able to establish, that when we were off we knew it. When we weren't as connected, we knew it. When we weren't making a great account of ourselves in terms of our daily habits and joy, we absolutely knew it. It didn't have to just come from the head coach. It came from every player in the locker room.

That to me is pretty remarkable, considering the short amount of time that we've actually had together and the youth of the locker room.

Then when you talk about development and the career years that Kira, the position we were able to put her in, the position that we were able to put Sug in and Jade, the half seasons that Emily and Stef in particular were able to have following the All-Star break where there was a little bit of a roster change and some minutes that we could give, and then let's not overlook the two rookies who were All-Stars, Kiki in particular who I think gets a little bit less of shine, remarkably so, because she's doing her work against the toughest position in the league.

Sonia is a godsend; nothing to take away from Sonia. But Kiki is putting in work against, like, the best players in our league and getting it done. Even Slim, who is doing her thing in Seattle, but I think she played pretty well with us.

Just from a culture and development standpoint and you're asking for a review of the season, I just feel like, man, we

did okay. There's more to go. There's more to do. There's year two challenges. There's off-season into '26, all that good stuff. But looking back, we said we were going to be about culture and development. We said we were going to be a home for players and allow them to show up as their authentic selves but somehow bring it together in terms of Mystics basketball for a city to rally around.

I don't know, I feel like I'm running for office right now, but that's how I feel. You asked the question; that's how I feel.

Q. Looking forward, seeing how the players that we are here, that you know will be back kind of have developed, when you kind of start to look to see, okay, what additions do we need, what facets do we need to kind of take the next step, I think the other day you kind of mentioned shooting, pregame. Just kind of other facets, skill sets that you might be looking to add to this group during the off-season to complement this group.

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, a lot of that -- Jamila has done a wonderful job as a general manager, so a lot of that will come down to the conversations and moves that she'll make. But she's allowed me to weigh in and certainly leans on her staff as well.

So I just want to say, it's ultimately Jamila who will take the leadership there, as she should. What I can offer up is, yeah, of course, like shooting the basketball, we ranked pretty low there in terms of not only our ability to make that shot but actually take it. I'd love to see our shot selection in general kind of shift a bit more to being a little bit more three-point heavy.

Slim was able to bring a downhill attack to our offense that we lost a bit when she was gone. Taking care of the basketball generally, which goes to decision making.

Then defensively we can scheme in ways that will put our players in a situation to hopefully be a little bit more disruptive. That's more of like a -- I don't know if that's necessarily player specific, but it's more coaching, just trying to leverage some of our players' skills to be a little bit more disruptive defensively, which is something I talked about later in the year.

But that's generally what comes to mind, but we'll have a good amount of time to, like I said, follow J's lead, weigh in and offer some input, but there's a lot of time between now and then to get into that nitty-gritty, but it is coming fast.

Q. This question is going to naturally come across in a negative way but I don't intend it as such. When it comes to the goals that you guys have outlined for this



year, is there anything you feel like you guys still need to be striving for, whether it be in this off-season or entering next year that you were kind of hoping to accomplish this year?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: I mean, within the way that you framed the question, I just would say, like, you're never perfect, so I think the consistency towards those habits that we marked out.

I have referred to New York and Golden State, who really, really thumped up and kind of rocked our identity, I would say, in those two games. Like you don't want that to happen. So the consistency, you don't want that ever to happen.

I think that that becomes a mark of, like, a different type of team. In that sense, I'll say that because it's fresh and close to mind.

But I have to say, like, over a 44-game season where I'm not going to treat any player or staff member like a robot, we're going to give some grace, in terms of the challenges that we had this season, our youth, which is no longer being written about but still there, like we want time. We want time with this group. We need more reps. We want those desperately. That's why we want to let them exhale, but then, hey, let's get at it in this off-season in a coordinated, thoughtful and supported way that maybe if you're at another organization you're not getting that type of support, but it's because of our owner and everyone from the top down is putting us in a situation to make this happen, this project long-term.

I guess I would just say consistency, where we might have had a step back here or there, but body of work, I'm still very pleased with what we said we were going to do. Maybe if I watch more film, I'll feel differently, but right now, that's how I'm feeling.

Q. In terms of Sonia and Kiki, what's that next step for them? What do you want to see them either come into next year or use next season as a catalyst for what's next?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, super quick, like Sonia, I think there's -- listen, she's the most fouled player in the league. It's not even close. I don't want to get fined; it's just a joke. It's like embarrassing how she was officiated this year.

But I think one thing that will help her is just, like, some strength training that will allow her to continue to get fouled but maybe not be as sore after the game. It's just crazy how she was officiated this year. I've never seen anything like it.

So that, and I think we had her on the ball, which I'm excited about moving forward. It's not the only thing that she'll be doing. She's really good just playing with others. But just being able to initiate the point of attack, I think, is a fun growth area for her. I think strength and being a point of attack but also feeling good in those shoes of being a go-to player which evolve during the season.

I just want an aside, Paige Bueckers is an absolutely wonderful player. Based in Connecticut, I've been able to see her for a while now, but it just would be a shame if Sonia and Kiki don't get real consideration for Rookie of the Year. It would be a real shame because Sonia has performed at a level where she's all-time scorer single season for the Mystics as a rookie, and went from -- like she was almost -- she wasn't always our first option. So just let that settle in. She did all of this work and the level of efficiency for her to have and not be the first option is, like, crazy. Then you can say, well, okay, that falls on you as the head coach, but I'm developing a whole roster now.

So she was able to do all of that work without us getting her 30 shots a game. We've got to let that settle in.

Then I already talked about Kiki where she's putting in her work against Tina Charles, Alyssa Thomas, A'ja Wilson at times, Nneka, Stewie. It's like, really? And performing.

I think those two rookies -- to answer your question with Kiki, it would be just rounding out the play making and extending her range to three, but what they've already done is super exciting to build on, strength and on the ball and go to for Sonia, play making and extending Kiki's range, but also let's not forget what they're really good at and let's build on that for year two and then add some of these things that I referred to.

Q. When it comes to the expansion draft, I'm not asking about strategy or anything, we don't even know what the expansion draft is going to entail, but what are your general thoughts of how you can control the things that you can control on your side of the organization to make sure that you guys are set up for whatever happens happens?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: I don't know if I can answer that, to be honest. Like not even dodging the question, I just don't know. We don't know -- like you said, we just don't know enough to know.

I want any of our Mystics that are here that are ready to roll for '26-'27, but I can't even answer that.

I'm hopeful that smarter people than me come together, get



a deal done so that we're able to have '26, '27, '28, and then we can kind of focus on particulars of draft expansion and all that stuff, but it's just too premature to even give you a good response.

Q. You kind of sprinkled in references to it when you talked about Slim and Sonia, but it felt like after Slim was traded, one of the biggest things you lost was having a perimeter player who can really create advantages without a ball screen. I'm curious when you look at next year, and I'm not asking you to speculate whether this is going to come through player development or the draft or free agency, but how do you address having that type of player who thrives in isolation who you don't always need to get into a DHO or ball screen, how important do you think that is to have, or do you think that's just kind of a luxury you had with Slim?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: It's such a good question. Here's what I would say. One, we somehow managed to finish top 3 in the league in free throw attempts. We somehow managed to be around three or four in rim shot selection. So yes, Slim was a big part of that.

I also think Kiki and Kira were obviously big parts of that, and that's why we could end the season the way we did over the 44-game stretch with those analytics. Then Sug threw their hand in there and Sonia on the off night that an official would actually call a foul for her.

I would say where your question is spot on is that the ability to get downhill, to get into the lane, to get fouled at the guard position, like you said, without a ball screen, but at the guard position, was a nice complement to what we were able to do so convincingly and consistently in the front court.

That kind of gave us a two-headed attack to getting in there.

So spot on. And I think other teams, they benefit from that in their way.

Yes, we'd like that. Even with that, I still would lean on three-point shooting is really imperative for us. It's just the modern game.

Q. You keep mentioning New York and Golden State as games where you feel like you guys just kind of lost your process or didn't get it right. I'm curious if you think there's going to be a moment or a game when you look back on the season or when you're trying to inspire future teams, is there a game, even if it was a loss, where you felt like I got it right, or the team, we

got it right this time, we had the right attitude, the right process?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say -- you do your homework, by the way. It's a really good question. I'd probably say our Vegas games as a whole because we went to Vegas early in the season, and we found out a lot about ourselves in a game where they're -- Becky does a wonderful job, coached them up. There was some veteran experience there that kind of -- we felt like we might have outplayed them, but they were able to kind of seize that game, and we had to step back and go, okay, how can we learn.

Then the next time we went out there, I thought we played really, really well and we learned all of those lessons. We came here in Virginia and we kind of held on to those lessons even knowing that this was a veteran team that was coming back in for revenge, and we were able to stave them off.

They've gone on this incredible run, and A'ja is playing truly at an MVP level. No offense to anybody else but she's been spectacular, and I still felt like we were in the mix.

So it's just like, those games, I think, almost tell the story of the season in a way, and that's just coming to mind. There's probably another game here or there. But those matchups where we learned so much about ourselves, we were always resilient, playing against a really good team, getting remarkable performances, remembering one of those games Sug played 40 minutes, Jade took an elbow first play of the game, and Sug played 40 minutes and had a career performance. It was unbelievable.

That's the stage that we've allowed these players to be in, and they've allowed us to be on the ride for. But I would say Vegas for me, tons of resilience against a well-coached team, world-class players, and we showed up. We showed up big time. We can hang our hat on that.

Q. Throughout the day, almost every player has given a ton of compliments and accolades to the foundation and environment that you've created for them and poured into them. Just your thoughts on them praising you for the work that you've put into them?

SYDNEY JOHNSON: Yeah, no, I -- thank you. I don't know what to say except that they know. Jade is in the back here; she's going to make fun of me. I'm having the time of my life. They're here. I don't know what to say. It's just a really good feeling to be welcomed in.

I'm just telling you, I've coached enough times where there's not always this synergy for whatever reason, and



it's not players to blame, it's not coaches, it's just not always like this. You can still win games and all that. This is something different.

When I tell you you all had to remind me that we were on a 10-game skid, and I'm not a dumb guy, I can count, but it just doesn't feel that way, man. They let me in. They let me coach them. They let me be corny. They let me be difficult at times. They let me coach them. And they gave a ton of themselves.

For me, that's really nice to hear. But they just don't know how much they've made me love coaching. Like that's all I can tell you. I just wouldn't want to be anywhere else. That's all I've got.

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