

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Sacred Heart vs Presbyterian

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

Sacred Heart Pioneers

Coach Jessica Mannetti

Ny'Ceara Pryor

Sajada Bonner

Media Conference

JESSICA MANNETTI: Hello. Very excited to be here. Our team is coming off a very quick turnaround having won yesterday at noon and then hopped on a plane at 3:00 pm -- actually two days ago. Hopped on a plane yesterday and down here now in South Carolina.

We're super excited to be here. This is a historic place. This is going to be a really exciting tournament this year. There are amazing women's basketball teams throughout the country. We're very proud to be representing the mid-major level that's been receiving so much more love, and really proud to represent our community, our fans, and everybody who has come with us on this journey.

Q. Sajada, looking at the team schedule, winners of 19 of the last 20; 15 straight coming into this week. What's kind of been the team's secret sauce to finding the success to have a season so strong?

SAJADA BONNER: I would just say like we're a big family, so when we finally came together and connected with the new pieces, because a lot of people returned from last year, but the new pieces are always really important. We were finally able to connect and start conference, and we hit the ground running.

I think we always talk about Sacred Heart as a special place because we are big on family here. Once we were able to connect, play hard together, we were able to get those wins in a row and hopefully continue.

Q. Ny'Ceara, welcome to Columbia.

NY'CEARA PRYOR: Thank you.



Q. From a scoring standpoint this year, probably your best season offensively. Just what do you think has contributed to that for you this year? Just overall, for you, how has the year been from an offensive standpoint?

NY'CEARA PRYOR: Yeah, to piggyback off what you said, my scoring this year has elevated. Coming off a season like last year I wanted to continue that, and I think that's exactly what I did.

I just kind of had more confidence in myself this year and my teammates and my coaches also had the same amount of confidence they had in me last year, so I just took that and ran with it.

I just continued to score the ball.

Q. Ny'Ceara, I know it's been a tight turnaround, but have you been able to look at the matchup, and how do you break down Presbyterian? Or has it more been looking at just inward at yourselves to get ready for the tournament?

NY'CEARA PRYOR: Yeah, we just had scout prep and things like that. Our coaches did an amazing job with the scout. We're going to stick to the game plan. We don't want to give too much away, but just want to play our game, at our pace, and do what got us here.

That's the biggest thing for us.

Q. Looking at ya'll's resume, Sajada, this season ya'll are 20-0 so far this year when you're leading at halftime. How much is there an emphasis on getting out to a quick start tomorrow? Is it just if the game gets mucked up in the first half, just finishing strong? How much is there an emphasis on getting off to a quick start tomorrow night?

SAJADA BONNER: Starting ready is very important for our program. We're a fast-paced team, so we pride ourselves in getting defensive stops and having a team maybe play with us for one half, but not two.



So that's a big emphasis, always starting ready and just being grateful for the moment and giving everything we got any time possible.

Q. To you both, how much does it help you as players to kind of have a repeat from last year where you have a First Four, compressed week, coming off a conference championship? How much does that experience help you get prepared for a hectic week overall?

NY'CEARA PRYOR: Yeah, not a lot of teams get that First Four play-in game. I think that's one of the games that can help us prepare for the next game. Like I said, we are just going to play our game. We're just going to stay focused and stick to our game plan.

We got great coaches that are sticking with the game plan. We as players are going to trust the game plan, so that's all we can do.

SAJADA BONNER: And just being here before, I think it's a little more comforting that we did the flight to California last year and were still able to play, and this is a little bit after shorter flight.

Having a lot of people who are experienced and playing in March Madness, so it's not as much nerves and more gratitude and being excited for the moment.

Q. Ny'Ceara, talk about Coach Mannetti. First coach last year in NEC history to win an NCAA tournament game. What has she meant to you all? And being from a Fairfield, a native of Connecticut, speak about her leadership and her presence.

NY'CEARA PRYOR: Yeah, she's a great coach. I can't thank her enough for bringing us in and doing a great job with that program. She been here 11 years, 12 years.

JESSICA MANNETTI: 11.

NY'CEARA PRYOR: 12th year coming up. I just want to thank her for always being there for us. She's like a mom to all of us and gives that motherly love. Last year we had a talk with her, hey, we need this from you, and she needed things from me and Jada as well.

We just stuck together and had that family group. I'm just grateful to have Coach Mannetti and her great staff along with her to go along on this ride with us.

SAJADA BONNER: My gratitude for her is so high, and I know my teammates as well. Not only does she support

us on the basketball court, but in life and in the classroom. I think that's not understood by a lot of people having such a supportive coach who -- that they can go to at any time.

So I think we're so successful on the floor because we have someone like her.

Q. Sajada, as a team veteran, coming to a town that really loves basketball in Columbia here, can you give us your team scouting report? What can fans look forward to when they watch Sacred Heart play?

SAJADA BONNER: Grit. Fire. We're passionate about everything we do. We get hype. I mean, we have Ny'Ceara Pryor. If you don't now, you're going to find out after the next game.

You'll just get a team that loves each other and is very spirited.

Q. Coach, obviously you already mentioned it was a crazy last 48 hours so or. How much have you been able to focus on the game versus travel and hotel lodging? How much have you been able to balance the craziness the last 48 hours?

JESSICA MANNETTI: The best part of the job is that by the time you get to March, you're so programmed to wake up and just repeat, wake up and repeat, that sometimes the lack of sleep and just the hours you put in doesn't faze you.

I'm fortunate to have an unbelievable staff. They jumped on this, even when we saw who the matchups could potentially be. We had a little bit of a head start being able to clinch in the semifinal.

So they jumped on scout. They did a deep dive into some of our potential opponents so that the second our championship ended we had a little bit of time to celebrate and we were at the office until probably 11:30 Sunday night talking about scout, and then all day yesterday.

So I feel really prepared. With a one-day turnaround both teams have some advantages and disadvantages. I think we are used to a one-day turnaround. Our league plays Thursday, Saturday, so we're able to have just great turnaround in a one-day prep.

And the team is really locked in and focused in on scout. They trust and believe in the preparation. You can do the same thing over and over again every year, and if a team doesn't buy into that preparation, they're not going to be able to execute it on the floor.

This team really buys in and holds each other accountable in that preparation, so I'm really fortunate to have a great staff that helps us to prepare, and then a great team that's able to buy-in and get excited about that prep.

Q. 15 wins in a row. Back-to-back tournament titles. What about your team is clicking in the right time?

JESSICA MANNETTI: There are so many great things I could say about our team. It's funny, I always tell this story. So we love to incentivize our team with ice cream. When we get two wins in a row we promise them ice cream.

We got four wins in a row, all right, get a bigger ice cream.

And then six wins in a row. Okay, get the largest ice cream.

Eight wins in a row they're like, can we get a pint? We're like, sure. We're walking out these ice cream stores with pints of ice cream.

The big thing they talked about was, Coach, ten wins in a row and we want Hibachi.

They work so hard and we like to reward our players for such great achievements, and if food is the way they want to be rewarded, great.

We do bonus wheels and sprint savers and all sorts of treats. But I think they all knew once we hit conference, we got a wake-up call against Le Moyne early. That's it. We're done with losing.

I think they also really believed this is our year. We returned everybody. We added some great pieces. We were very focused. We wanted three banners. We were missing that regular season banner.

So that was goal number one and that was that long-term goal. In the short-term, every day is what we focused on for 40 minutes every opportunity we had.

Once they really kept it present, in the moment with being able to be successful reaching these short-term goals, that long-term goal became really incredible and then turned into this great win streak.

Once a team starts winning, it's hard to take away that belief, confidence, connection. That's where we are. We have great team connection. They buy into each other.

I don't have to do the accountability piece in practice as much because they're on it before I am with each other.

Then they're praising each other just as much when something great is going on, too.

I'm very lucky. This has made my job a lot easier this year. A lot of people like to say, Coach, congratulations, great job. I always say, this is all them.

This team is special. I told them yesterday, this team is one of the most special teams we've ever had here. This era of Sacred Heart women's basketball is one of the most special we've ever had here historically.

They're breaking the records. This is something with their whole life they can take with them and always be so proud of. I'm just a proud coach most days.

Q. First off, love to work for you guys with all the ice cream. (Laughing.) Second off, you mentioned returning everyone from last year basically. Having that consistency, was there anything you were able to add as a wrinkle from last year to this year? Able to compare and contrast? What is different about this team, whether it's Xs and Os or the mentality?

JESSICA MANNETTI: That's a great question. I think this team is very resilient. Last year we were a little more fragile in the sense that early we were young and inexperienced, and we rocked with a lot of young and new players. Jada came last year as a transfer and we had a lot of freshmen. We were very young last year. I named Ny captain four games in last year. I was like, that's it. We're going to rock with this.

So last year we were a little more fragile. More peaks and valleys. When we were returned this group and they all stayed together -- I mean, after we won the championship last year they turned to me the next day and said, we're running it back. That is how quick they knew they wanted this to be another season of success.

Now, we have experience. We always say ride the high and survive the low. They do that, and it doesn't cost us a ten-point run anymore. I think our team's resilience has been special. We work on that every day in practice. We'll put them in position to fail, put our players' backs against the wall and say, hey, figure it out, find a way, and they do.

I love this response because they do that on the floor. Sometimes a team will go on a run and we'll say, settle down, we're good. They go back out, and that's where you see these great answers, starting ready, or coming out in the third quarter ready, which is what we love doing.

I've been lucky to have a more experienced team. Even though we're young, we have a lot of experience that

allows us to be more consistent.

I think that piece is probably the most special. Obviously we have some great new players added that bring a lot of energy and personality and they just added a lot of value and depth to our group as well, but I think the special piece for us is just the consistency and being able to really stay connected when times are hard.

Who you are as a team is what you do when times are hard. I think we passed those tests.

Q. Off that, you had a young team last year; bringing everybody back; in the same scenario last year. How much of a benefit is that to have the experience of playing in this tournament last year going into tomorrow night knowing that a lot of the ladies that you had went through in this time last year?

JESSICA MANNETTI: It's awesome. You know, we were young last year and I said to the freshmen and some of the returners, do you guys know what you did? What you did is so hard. They were like, really? That's great, coach. This was awesome. Oh, my gosh they don't even know how hard this is.

We know this year. Coming back to this and having this experience is great and it does give us an advantage. We know what to expect. We know that tournament play is a different animal. Even our NEC tournament, that tournament part of your basketball season is a different beast.

So now on a national stage every team is here for a reason and has done what we have done that has an automatic bid. We're playing against another league champion who's playing well. They've won eight out of the last nine games, ran through the conference tournament. They believe.

And were in the position we were in last year. I love this matchup. It's a great matchup: champion against champion. Let's roll the ball out and see who is the best one at the end.

Q. Just to keep going with that conversation about Presbyterian, I know the very limited games you've been able to watch on them, scouting report wise what's going to be the key matchup going into tomorrow night? Player, position, aspect of the game that you feel is going to be something you really need to hit on to find success?

JESSICA MANNETTI: With us, we try to keep it focused on what we can control. It's all our pace of play. We want to control that as much as possible. If we can do that, a lot

of times we can be successful. Being ready or up at halftime, like that's all within the realm of the controlling of the pace of play.

Obviously we are targeting some of their better players. Hey, at any time (audio disruption) stories about. So we want to just keep their great players at their averages and hopefully lower if we can.

But we're up for the challenge and excited for it.

Q. Just wanted to ask you too. Asked the girls this earlier. What is Sacred Heart to you from a personal standpoint being from Fairfield? In your 11th year lead thing program. As you stated earlier, it's getting better every year. Ya'll keep building on success. Just how special is it for you personally to lead this program at this time?

JESSICA MANNETTI: It was a dream when I got the position 11 years ago and I feel the same way about it today. It's home for me. I grew up here. I have seen Sacred Heart grow to what it is today. It's exploded. It is one of the most beautiful campuses in the country. It has the best people and the best community. I wish you could have seen the energy in our gym on our championship Sunday.

It's indescribable.

This is home for me. My mom is with us on the trip. Like she comes to the games. Our families come to the games. They bring 15 passenger busses from Maryland with all of our common. I really believe when I took the position over that it takes a village to develop young women, and that's the bigger piece of the program, the holistic aspect that we really pride ourselves on, and I know you have a coach here that does the same exact thing, right?

Be believe in the bigger picture of life that's so important to have our players be prepared for what's going to happen to them down the road and to be strong women. We want to produce strong women who are ready to take on the world.

Being able to lead in a place like Sacred Heart where I have unbelievable leadership that I get to look at right you now from this stage and be supported, you can't ask for anything better.

This allows me to have an awesome opportunity to have these young women really buy-in and pay it forward at the end of the day to maybe do it for another little girl, you know, that has this dream. When I think about it I get emotional because when it's home, it hits different. I think that's why our culture and family is so strong here.

