

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

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

Presbyterian Blue Hose

Coach Alaura Sharp

Bryanna Brady

Tilda Sjokvist

Media Conference

ALAUARA SHARP: First of all, thank you to the media that's here today and to the Presbyterian staff for traveling with us. It's been a really exciting week, and I'm so proud of our team and the strides that we made over the month of February and the beginning stages of March.

Those of you that have followed us know that we had a bumpy up and down season. Some of you probably saw us play in early December down here. We just grew and grew and bonded together as a coaching staff and as a team.

Because of that we are Dancing and we're thrilled to be doing it for the very first time.

As you know, there is only one first time to do a first thing, and we're excited to represent the Clinton community and we feel like we have had so much love and support from alums and everybody.

We're excited to get back to work. For a week we really just did player development and kind of riding our wave. When Selection Sunday came we felt like we could put our heads down and get right back to work.

Q. Bryanna, welcome to Columbia. Just take us through the emotions. What have the last couple days been like? First conference championship in program history; quick turnaround; big game tomorrow. What are ya'll feeling?

BRYANNA BRADY: I think it's just a lot of excitement. It's very new for each and every one of us, so I think that we have been soaking it all in. The coaches have really



emphasized soaking it all in but staying focused.

We turned the page recently to an opponent like Coach Sharp said. We found out who we were playing and whatnot. But as the days on from getting off the bus after we won and getting off the bus the next day, it was so much love and support around us.

It definitely brought us closer together as a community in the Clinton community. A lot of people out there supporting us. It puts smiles on everybody's faces and fills their hearth with love. I think it was really good just to see how many people came around us. We have been enjoying the process and loving all the support.

Q. Bryanna, Coach referenced the strong finish to the season. From the player perspective, what do you attest to that? Eight of the last nine games you were the winner. What was the inside secret from the players perspective?

BRYANNA BRADY: I think that it was more so just the connections that we have as a team on and off the court. It definitely brought us together, and when we went on that like couple-game losing streak we definitely took a look in the mirror and just tried to bring something to the table, each of us bring something different to the table and like improve on little things.

We worked on it a lot as a team just team bonding outside of basketball and trying to grow our connection. I think it really, really helped us on the court and showed in those last games. We have a lot of people in our corner, and I think it just helps us when we have such good connection on and off the court.

Q. Tilda, obviously first Big South championship in school history. Also the most single-season wins in program history. You guys have won eight of nine since February 10th. If you can remember that far back before ya'll went on the winning streak, what clicked for you and how confident are you guys knowing that you're playing your best basketball at the right time?



TILDA SJOKVIST: Yeah, I don't know. I just feel like we all switch. I can't really describe what happened but we all just came ready to play and we all were so connected this past month.

Yeah, like you said we're playing our best basketball, and we are just enjoying the time. We have a lot of seniors on our team and we're enjoying the last couple of games with them.

We have had a lot of injuries and a lot of adversity, and I just think this made us even closer and filled a bigger purpose of playing basketball.

We play for those who can't play on the court, and, yeah, we all just fight. We had one goal, and it's been up and downs through the season, but, yeah, we wanted to win and that's what we did.

Q. Tilda, after winning the Big South championship you were named tournament MVP. Played super great in that tournament. What can fans expect to see from you in the First Four game tomorrow?

TILDA SJOKVIST: Yeah, I mean, honestly, just playing hard. It was now a little bit more than a week we played last time, and I mean, me and the team are just ready to play hard these last couple games we have together.

Yeah, I mean, we proved ourselves that we are supposed to be here and we just want to play hard. For me, too. I want to lead the team and play hard, make memories with them, yeah.

Q. Bryanna, nine girls have scored in double figures at least once in a game this year. How confident are you as a leader on this team knowing that if one of you isn't scoring, you have a multitude, whether it's in the starting lineup or on the bench, that can go out there and get ya'll a basket when you need one?

BRYANNA BRADY: It gives great confidence, especially knowing that we work so hard on player development and seeing it come through and shine through on the court, it transferring. It means a lot, especially when --like as a starter, sometimes my game isn't always there 100%, and knowing that there are my post players will come in and match my energy or exceed my energy and bring something to the table.

All of us always work on bringing something to the table. Definitely gives you confidence on the floor knowing you're not the only one out there. It's not all on you. It's not pressure. It's a team effort. We make sure we stay together as a team and work together and pull the wins out

as a team.

Q. Tilda, from you perspective, playing here already in this arena, as a perimeter player, a shooter, how much does that help you confidence-wise knowing you are playing in a large arena, but you already have the shooter's eye and the feel of the arena when you are trying to run the offense?

TILDA SJOKVIST: Yeah, that's definitely good. I mean, it's confident we have played here before and obviously that helps. I just feel like -- I mean, yeah, it's going to be like any other game. We need to come and execute what we do. And like Bry just talked about, if someone doesn't have a good game, someone else will have it.

I just think we have confidence in like everybody can score and everybody is a threat. Yeah, obviously we have a good chance. We have played here before. I think that's definitely a benefit for us. Yeah, just going to go out and play hard and do what we can do.

Q. Bry, finding out you're playing against Sacred Heart on Sunday night and a quick turnaround with the game on Wednesday, how can you prepare and how prepared are you for this game?

BRYANNA BRADY: I feel prepared and confident because my coaches and our coaching staff took their time to make us prepared. If that makes sense.

Them working hard on a scout, getting us ready and us understanding the game plan and assignment helps. On my part, just making sure I'm resting my body and recovering well and then executing really getting the mental reps if I'm not on the court and really going hard in my reps when I am on the court just to execute the execute.

We have been emphasizing that very much in the past couple days, is just making sure that we're executing the game plan. I think that we all take -- do our part. And even or trainer. She does her part as far as trying to make sure we're ready, our bodies, and it's our job to get our minds right, and the coaches put out a great product on the floor for to us execute.

We just take the time. It was a quick turnaround, but I think it was -- we were prepared for it. I think we're prepared well for the game tomorrow.

Q. I'll have you both answer. Tilda, I don't know how much you'll be able to dig into Sacred Heart with such a quick turnaround, but from your perspective, from each of your perspective, perimeter or post, what do

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

you think will be the one key to find success tomorrow night and impose your team's will?

TILDA SJOKVIST: I think just keep doing what we been doing. Like I mentioned earlier, we been playing our best basketball during the whole season. I just think we need to keep building on that, go out and go hard. What we been working on all year, now is the time to execute it. One game and we're out, so we need to do what we been working on, execute what we been working on.

Yeah, just that.

BRYANNA BRADY: I agree. Doing what got us here. Executing our side of the ball when we're on offense, and then our defense wins games. We have been working hard on defense. I think just executing what our game plan is on offense and defense will definitely put us in a spot to be successful.

I think that we go out there and play hard and we control what we can control, we'll be okay.

Q. Interested from the coaching perspective, the First Four, such a tight turnaround, 48 hours between the selection show and getting ready to play a game. For you as the head coach, what is the balance between the operational side of travel and lodging versus game planning for Sacred Heart?

ALAURO SHARP: Well, the nice thing is we had the week in between to kind of get our bearings, get organized. LeRomeo McKee our director of basketball operations, I think he put together four different itineraries, which no one asked him to do. That's just the work ethic he has.

He was prepared if we were going to fly, if we were going to bus. He was all over the bracketology and figuring out what we were going to do.

This was the easiest option for us, right down the road. It's great for our fan base. For the coaching staff we split the scout up. We had a coach take offense, a coach take defense, another coach take what we call special teams, baseline, sideline, and personnel, and then I took game flow and kind of what are the tendencies of your head coach and things.

So we teamed it up, because someone also needs to fast forward and start working on the next scout, too. So we put our head down to work. We told our kids going in, we're going to work really hard tonight to make sure we put them in the best position to be successful.

Once we come in tomorrow with the game plan, we need

to get started executing it right away, because you kind of lack one day of prep time, and normally your scouting coach is working a week to two weeks out.

I think we feel good. I think we know them. I think like Tilda said, we want to focus on what got us here. And we told our team yesterday in practice, we want to copy and paste our Radford defense and bring it tomorrow, because defense travels. When your shot is not falling, when you're in an arena, a loud environment, things are different.

Your defense is way more controllable, and Sacred Heart has some really good players that we have to really key in on. We need to use our length and wall up and keep them off the free throw line and be the best version of PC.

Q. Just get your perspective, winning 8 of 9 since February 10th, from your view, what do you think clicked your you're group? What has it been like to watch them succeed down the stretch?

ALAURO SHARP: Well, one thing we talked about the last few days is what I'm describing as invisible progress. We went on a four-game losing streak and played really well in three out of four of those games. Just didn't win.

We came back home after I think the third or fourth loss in a row and we went around to each player and asked them to write down what is one right decision better that they could have made that would've impacted winning in the game before.

Because I think you sometimes feel like it's bigger than it is. Even if it's 15 points, it's still not as big as it seems like. You might be one run from being in the game if we would've just closed the quarter out better, started the first half better, whatever it was. I think they did that.

I think they really like Bry said, looked in the mirror and decide what am I willing to change. What one better decision am I willing to make. And I think we asked on both sides of ball. One thing offensively, defensively, I don't know if they remember what they were.

I think they started doing those things. I think it is just invisible progress from player development that you're just staying in the gym. This team works. They work really hard. I mean, we lost really bad to South Carolina. Those kids went right back home and worked.

There was never, we feel sorry for ourselves. There are 30 points on crutches on the sideline that we've lost from our roster, and we said too, we got where we set our hearts to go this season, but it looks a lot different than maybe we thought it was going to be.

I think that's what makes it even more rewarding and probably a part of why we're here. We were playing for a bigger purpose. We were playing for those kids that couldn't step only the court because we got the opportunity to play and I got the opportunity to coach, and we're here and going to make the absolute most of it.

Q. This is your second time sitting up in that chair this season. Can you just talk a little bit about how much the team has changed since then and how much more this game means to you since that time.

ALAUARA SHARP: Well, the interesting thing about being here is everyone was asking me before we came and played the undefeated No. 1 team in the country, why are you playing that game? Why are you playing it the day after this game and this, that, and the other.

I answered at the time, because I want to prepare my team for March Madness. I thought we had a team more that was than capable to be in this type of scenario. Obviously being in the First Four game, it gives us just another chance to play on this court, play in this environment, and get our feet underneath us.

We want to survive and advance. One day at a time, one game at time, one rep at a time, one press offense at a time. We are going to see some press tomorrow. I feel like your job as the head coach is to really put your players in a position to be successful, and it's been great just scheduling this environment and being able to play here. It worked out in our favor.

I couldn't have dreamed it up where it would be in the exact location, but the quick turnaround, playing a high-level basketball team in a great environment was something that we have been there and done that. And kind of done it twice. We played at Kansas State in a big environment also on an awesome platform and stage, and they're one of the top teams in the country as well.

I think we're prepared to make a run.

Q. Looking specifically at Sacred heart, obviously Pryor, No. 3, such a dynamic guard, great scorer. Does she make you adjust anything defensively? Coming off holding Radford to I think 37 points in your last game, obviously your defense is traveling. What does she challenge your defense specifically with her ability?

ALAUARA SHARP: Well, we have a lot of really great players in the Big South Conference, too, and so the way we need it defend her, we defended some of the players in

our conference. She's kind of a blend of -- we have been telling our players she is a blend of three different really good players in our conference. There is no one exactly like her.

But I don't think you can card her with one person. She's too good. Keeps the ball in her hands so much. One thing that's important for us is we need to bore them to death. They're going to dribble and lull you to sleep, and we have to bore them to death with our great stance and intensity.

We call it playing with our wings, our hands out to the side and playing in a really great stance so that we're ready when she decides to make her charge at the rim.

She's really quick. She's really crafty. She is really good going to the right, but very good at the rim, so we have to do all we can to keep her out of the paint.

Q. All three of you have talked about this at some point since you've been up there. Logistically it makes sense for you to be here, but how excited are you that the Clinton community is just down the road and they can come here and support ya'll?

ALAUARA SHARP: I'm excited and thankful. I'm thankful that our administration, president, athletic director, advancement team, sports information team, like they are not letting this opportunity go to waste. They have fan busses coming. Our selection show was not normal. You look at other people, they're in restaurants. We had an entire gym full of people. I love that.

I think this program deserves that, and I'm so thankful we have an administration and people that have stepped up to the plate and made the experience and really capitalizing on the 50, 60 miles, whatever it is, down the road, playing in Columbia, so I'm very thankful.

Q. I like to put the coaches on the spot. The players up here with you, obviously both are a little bit different with Bryanna coming in as a sixth year this year; Tilda, coming in as a second year. What have they meant to the program? Bryanna bringing a lot of experience. Tilda obviously has done a lot in her two-ish years so far. Kind of talk on your players up here a little bit and what they mean to your team right now.

ALAUARA SHARP: First of all, the power of human connection. I love them. I know they love me too. We don't love each other every single day, but we respect each other every single day.

As soon as we step off that court, win, lose, or draw, I think

there is still a strong connection and we're all ready to go right back to work together.

Bry came here when it wasn't cool to play at PC. We were struggling, and she came here to win a championship. She came back to win a championship. I think she had a lot of fun. We had 13 returners out of 13 players last year on our team and one new freshman.

I just think that she came back here, filed her appeal to have the opportunity to play with them more, and it's because of the connection they have with each other.

Tilda has a cool recruiting story. Tilda I got a Twitter DM, Evaluated her film. We Zoomed with her. She is like, sure, I'll do that. She literally committed on the Zoom, sight unseen.

We knew she was going to be an impact player, be really good as a freshman. Her maturity level, her experience with the national team, and she has come here and helped take this program to another level. We would not be where we are without either one of those two players, and they know that and they're confident in that.

I know they're going to come out and play really, really hard tomorrow and do all that they can so we can survive and advance.

I can't say enough about the kind of people they are and the kind of students they are. They trusted me through the process of losing. I think a lot of times your players start looking around and not trusting you as the head coach. They've always believed in me, and that will never -- I'll never forget that as long as I coach.

Q. I want to get your personal perspective. Since you took the job in April of 2018 this program has steadily gotten better over the last six years. You look back on this year, I know it's a whirlwind right now, but first conference championship in program history, most single season wins in program history. Just what has this season meant to you in your profession and just your emotions as you kind of take a step back and look at what you were able to accomplish this year?

ALAURO SHARP: You know, high achieving people sometimes never take a second to be proud of themselves. We did it. That's what I keep saying to myself. We did it. I do not do this alone. I did not build the program alone. It came with support from PC and administration. It came from coaching staff working really hard.

But it is very rewarding. I think back when Danny Sterling, who was the athletic director that hired me, when called me

to see if I would be interested in the job I had to Google the school. I had never heard of it. No one knows what a Blue Hose is. I wasn't familiar with the conference.

When I came on campus it was a fit for me. Buildings aren't going to hug you. The people make a place. I knew this was somewhere I could win. I loved the challenge of being able to make history somewhere. I loved that there wasn't -- there was success in the program, but not championship level success.

When I took the job I knew this was a place I could win a championship. So being able to say that we've done it, and that's what every recruit that I ever recruited, I told them, and I keep this net in a vision box in my office, and I told them, there is only one first time to do a first thing.

When you're signing up to come here, you got to understand this is what we're setting out to do. It's going to be hard, gritty, it's not pretty turning around a program, but we did it and it is so rewarding. I'm thankful and proud to be a part of PC. I am so thankful that Danny Sterling took a chance on me. I was an old JUCO coach, assistant coach at the Division I level, and he hired me because he said I probably swept the floor before and probably functioned with smaller staffs, and that's why PC has been such a great fit for me.

Q. Bryanna, wanted to ask you, you're in the same tournament as Caitlin and Kamilla and Angel. What does that mean to you?

BRYANNA BRADY: It means a lot just knowing there are such great players around.

We put this school on the map as far as something that they've never done before. It means so much to me.

They're great players and I'm just as much of a fan as anybody else because they've made such big -- a big face for women's basketball across the nation.

I think that in us doing this, making this big accomplishment, it definitely adds to that success. It doesn't go unshown.

But I'm excited to be out there and to play with the big lights and play with these players and just be a part of this point in history.

It's a great feeling, and I'm so glad I'm a part of that.

Q. Was there a moment this week or in recent days when it hit you, oh, this is a big deal what we're doing?



BRYANNA BRADY: I mean, being completely honest, I don't know if I've wrapped my head around the fact we won a conference championship. I'm still in awe just in the fact that when you achieve a goal that you have, coming back I had one goal in mind and I really, really wanted to accomplish it, and the fact that I did that, I'm very proud of myself and the team.

So I don't think that I really wrapped my mind around it, but I understand that the moment is big and I understand that we are in a place that PC has never been before and it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I'm excited to be out there.

So I don't know if my mind has really wrapped around the whole situation, but I know I'm going out there to play a basketball game that I've done many times before and going to go out there and play hard and show -- we're going to put a good product on the floor.

Q. I know you have Sacred Heart first. How eager are you guys to see the Gamecocks again and show them how much you improved since you played them the first time?

BRYANNA BRADY: Yeah, I think we're really eager to go out there and play. Like you said, our team was different in the pre-season and in the beginning. We're a much different team. I think that it definitely puts a little bit more support under our feet just knowing we played them once before. Being able to go back and watch film, see what worked and what didn't.

Just show that we aren't just the PC team that came out here in December and we were kind of -- it was a different atmosphere for us, and I think you could see that when we were playing. It was just different.

Being out there and playing with them. So I'm excited to go out there. I am eager, especially to go out there and show we're a different team and we made progress. It's a lot different team than the pre-season and I'm excited to go show the progress we made.

Q. Coach, you mentioned your history as a JUCO coach and D1 assistant. What do you think of how far the women's game has come and the stars they have now and for PC to be even a small part of that? What does that mean?

ALAUURA SHARP: I love it. You know, I love all of the media, whether it's good, bad. All of it I think is good for the women's game. People might disagree with me. All the great coaches, Dawn Staley is probably the greatest

coach in the game, and the way she represents women's basketball and talks about it and everything that she has done to grow the game is great.

I want to be like that, too. I want to be someone that grows the game and gets it out here and tries to do everything that I can to make women's basketball great, because of all the people that came before us and invested and all the women that plays with no scholarships and coaches that played with no salaries and they volunteered and had no locker rooms. And now we get full scholarships, we get amazing salaries and contracts and media support.

I am so thankful to be in March Madness where we can give our name a little notoriety and give our college of 1000 students some publicity. I think we're the smallest ever to play in the NCAA tournament. We want to be the smallest to ever win an NCAA tournament game and we're so looking forward to the challenge.

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