

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

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

Presbyterian Blue Hose
Coach Alaura Sharp
Bryanna Brady

Mara Neira

Media Conference

Presbyterian 49, Sacred Heart 42

ALaura SHARP: First of all, I just want to say Sacred Heart is a really great basketball team. Really good defensively. We met a team that's just as good defensively as we are, and they did a great job of turning us over.

I feel like we edged them out just a little bit defensively. I thought they had really, really hard shots and we just did a great job.

We made history. It's such a great feeling and I'm so proud of our players and I'm so proud of our community for really rallying around us.

The Blue Hose Nation was deep up there, and that means so much to your program. When you create a vision when you take over a program and start seeing it come to life, it's the most rewarding feeling. I'm forever grateful for this moment and this memory that will be etched in us forever.

Q. Mara and Bry, what was going through your mind the final few seconds? I saw you guys waving to the fans. The emotions you guys were feeling.

MARA NEIRA: I feel like the game got really close at the end and we handled it had pretty well. And also having those fans there, it just hyped us up. And I don't know, I think we finished the game really good.

It feels great to have fans that support us and our program.

BRYANNA BRADY: Yeah, I agree with Mara. Just being out there and seeing all the people that came from Clinton



and around wherever to come and support us, seeing all that blue in the stands, it really put a lot of love in our hearts and made us want to play harder and better and put a good product on the floor, because people came out and took their time to come watch us.

At the end when we were waving to them, just showing them like we appreciate you, we see you, and we want you guys to come back. It really means a lot that they came down here today.

Q. Mara, you didn't have anything going offensively until late in the second quarter. Then you went on a mini run of your own. Talk about how it felt to finally get the lid off the basket there.

MARA NEIRA: Yeah, I don't know. I feel like we were really on the floor good, and then we realized that what was working was the screening game, and that's how I got my points and it kept me going.

It wasn't a great shooting day today so we realized that -- I realized that -- so I tried to gain points off the paint and stuff like that.

Q. For both players, you guys were making history this season. You knew you could make history today. What were your emotions like coming into this one?

MARA NEIRA: I don't know. I never been here before. We never been in the March Madness. Winning this game, I'm still in shock. I mean, we are going to play South Carolina next game and we just made history twice.

It was the first time we got all these wins. We just add another one today. I'm just excited to be here.

BRYANNA BRADY: Before the game I think that I was fine up until I think a couple hours before the game. I started to feel those nerves, those butterflies, like I'm you have I'm excited. I was so anxious to play the game.

So going out there, I think that you could kind of see it, that we were a little bit like hesitant or back on our heels. When we got into the flow of the game and found our



rhythm I think it was really good for us.

It's crazy to be playing with the greats of our women's basketball right now, currently. I think it's crazy that we're out there just doing the same thing that we were doing to get to this point, and being able to be a part of history, you know what I mean?

Going out there and getting another win, like she said, adding to that record, and also winning our first March Madness game. It puts so much love in my heart and makes me so happy for the program, community, for everybody around.

Q. Bryanna, I know you thought you were done last year, right?

BRYANNA BRADY: Yeah.

Q. Tell us how you got a sixth year and what that meant.

ALaura SHARP: Yeah, so after the season last year I put in an appeal to the NCAA basically to get my freshman year back. I played at Riverside for three years and I just put in the petition. At the time the rules were a little bit different. I'm not exactly 100% sure how it happened. That's what we did.

I had a great team behind me and the coaches really put together like something to be successful and get the appeal. I got that appeal, found out, and just put my head down and worked. I mean, I don't know, most people don't know, but I had hip surgery, and so I was out kind of in the summer.

So when I was finding out going through that process I was recovering at the same time. When it was time to put my head down and work, I mean, we got here and we made history. (Smiling.)

Q. Bryanna, what was with the key in the second half? You really got going. They kept feeding you. Did you think you would be able to -- what were they doing that you were able to capitalize on in the second half?

BRYANNA BRADY: I was just trying to stick to my post-ups, trying to make sure that I was posting hard and giving my guards a target.

I think they were running through passes, and in the beginning, in the first half, I wasn't being as strong I should have been playing. When I got the ball I was trying to be aggressive at the rim and fake the ball and see if they'll bite on some of those shot fakes, pass fakes, and then just

being aggressive and play strong at the rim.

I think that's what got me going.

And then also my teammates staying confident in me and telling me to keep going to work. I think them pushing me and my coaching staff, too, telling me I am who I am and I'm a good basketball player, so stick with it, I think that's kind of what put a little bit more motivation and helped me find that rhythm and get back in the groove.

Q. Coach, talking about the international and national flavor of your team, what does this window do for you guys recruiting? Looking for more outside Clinton players?

ALaura SHARP: Most definitely. And what's really cool about the international players is Tilda talks about this all the time, she didn't really understand what March Madness was until she came to the States. I think our domestic players, they grow up going to games as a kid, watching it on TV and dream to go play in it one day.

And so last year before with went, because last year we had so many new players on our team and a lot of them were international. So we played before we went to the conference tournament the one shining moment video so that they would understand how big of a deal that it was.

We ended up ending our season on a buzzer beater. For us to be in this position now and them get to go experience, especially Tilda, she's like a kid in a candy store. It's dreams come true for all of us, including myself. I've coached for 18 years, and I've worked for this moment.

To be able to lead a team to a win in March Madness is amazing, so rewarding, like I started the press conference with.

But I think any of this -- we're actually getting few more responses than we did maybe this time last year. It's great, because our media team and NCAA, the NCAA has given us great press and there has been a ton of social media. We just do a great job marketing the women's game, and that's really changed in the last several years.

People are falling in love with the women's game and I love all of it. I'm here for all of it. I want to do all I can to grow the women's game myself.

Q. Can you talk about how the team is a family and how much love you guys have for each other and how close you are and how that impacts the game on the court for your team?

ALaura SHARP: I think it's twofold. We have love for each other and we have respect. Because when you're on a team and it's like being in a family, it's gritty, it's ugly sometimes, it's gross. I mean, I go back to some of our locker room talks after games and getting our team regrouped, and you second guess yourself as the head coach, second guess yourself as a player.

But we always go back to one-on-one conversations. I spend a lot of time one-on-one with our players. I'll ask them questions. You know, how can I coach you better? What can I do to lead you better? And the kids are honest with me and I'm honest with them.

It's because we have deep seeded relationships and we can talk really open and free with each other. I have a great coaching staff who has just brought the family together, too. They have my back and we love each other. There is no coaching staff I would rather be on this journey with. They're amazing from our coaches to our sports information to our athletic trainer. We are a family and it's bled into the team.

It's not perfect all the time but we've gotten to be playing our best basketball at the right time. There were some really lows in the season and some injuries and some different things. But they just kept being glued together and that's why we're here today.

Q. Coach, you were able to hold their leading scorer to I think one point in the first half, without really changing what you do defensively to double her or anything like that. Can you talk about that performance and the offensive rebounding that really kept them in the game?

ALaura SHARP: Yeah, I think Pryor is one of the best players we've seen all season long, her shiftness and ability to get downhill.

I thought we had her kind of bored in the first half and she wasn't getting to her go-to move and forced her to some other things and got her a little bit frustrated in the first half.

I thought in the second half she really came out and was more aggressive and found different areas of the floor. She got on the baseline and went in transition.

You know, we did pretty good job. We sent her to the foul line probably a little bit too much, but I'm proud of how we did keep them off the free throw line. They live at the free throw and with points in the paint. We studied the analytics and our kids bought into the game plan.

I don't love how we were on the defensive glass, especially

in the first half. Like you said, I thought that was the one thing that was keeping them in the game was second-chance points and just an area that we have to clean up and clean it up quick, because South Carolina is great on the offensive glass.

Q. Coach what was the celebration like in the locker room? Also, what was your message? They got it to three I think late in the fourth quarter. What was the message during that one timeout?

ALaura SHARP: The message was just to be poised and keep doing what we're doing and keep stringing stops together. I've always found that if you put more emphasis and focus on something that's more controllable, like defense, sometimes it'll keep your offense loose without putting pressure on the offensive side of the ball.

We just wanted to get the ball in the right spots, and I thought we did. I thought we had a lot of great looks that just did not go down. I think some of that goes to Sacred Heart is so wiry at the rim. They're strong, wiry, and do a good job of walling up and not fouling.

The locker room celebration, as the head coach I've been trying to do a really good job of soaking it all in but keeping our team focused and ready to hunt more wins and not be satisfied.

The locker room celebration was they were excited. I mean, Nuria, she says to me when I'm walking to press, Coach, we just won a game in the March Madness. I cannot absolutely believe it. You know, I was excited to be in the First Four in-games so we had a chance to get our feet underneath us with is being the first time our program has been in the tournament. We have nobody that's experienced anything like this even on or coaching staff.

So it's a memory that we'll make forever, and just being the underdog of the smallest school to play and now the smallest school to ever win a game in the tournament, I love that and we'll kind of keep playing that card.

Q. What will it take for you guys to pull what would probably the biggest upset in women's tournament history on Friday?

ALaura SHARP: Yeah, it'll take a lot for us. I think that even though South Carolina is undefeated, I think you still got to put together a game plan. You still got to create some belief in your locker room and divide the game up into mini games; not look at the whole game as 40 minutes and beating South Carolina.

You've got to focus on trying to string possessions



together, win each three-minute game segment by segment, and keep it close and stay in striking distance.

Fastscripts by ASAP Sports...

We've got to keep them off the glass. They make it really hard to score with their pressure, so we have to be really smart with the ball and finish through contact. They are so long and athletic. We struggled to score today. We've got to find a way to make some shots and put the ball in the hole a little bit more come Friday.

Q. Can you take us through the sixth year for Bryanna. I guess it was a long shot, seems like a long shot. Take us through that, how important the last couple weeks have been to her.

ALAUURA SHARP: Yeah, well, that's why she filed her appeal, was she wanted to get her freshman year back. She just didn't play a lot of minutes, so that's why they ended up giving her that year back in her appeal. The Riverside athletic director was so supportive and awesome in assisting us with getting all that paperwork together.

We did not anticipate her getting it back. That's why she had the surgery in the off-season, and we maybe would not have elected to do that if we knew the appeal was going go through.

We were recruiting her position. We had made an offer. We got a verbal commitment on FaceTime the same day we found out she was getting the year back, so the timing in that was a little bit tough. I went from celebrating with my sisters in Punta Cana to having to make a really tough phone call and conversation with a recruit.

But the way that she has soaked it all in has been awesome. To kind of just sit back and watch the players be so happy and so thankful for the support of the community.

Bry was we me, and Bry and Paige Kindseth were really with me in the trenches of the program. So I think it's really rewarding to both of them to know where we were three years ago to where we are now. They stuck with me and kept believing in me.

I think that's ultimately why it's so rewarding for them, is the rest of the players came when we were having winning seasons, finishing in fourth place in the conference.

Bry and Paige were with us when it was really gritty and tough. So Bryanna is an amazing human, too. We tell her sometimes she should be a coach. She's really smart and intelligent, and you can see how she delivers herself in interviews. She deserves all this just like the rest of our team.

