

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

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

**Sacred Heart Pioneers**

**Coach Jessica Mannetti**

**Sajada Bonner**

**Sierra Johnson**

Media Conference



Yeah, we were able to rally back. It just wasn't enough unfortunately.

**Q. Was there a point, Sierra, early in the game when you kind of saw Ny'Ceara was struggling to find her shot and you said I need to be more proactive offensively and use that team effort to fill in the gap? She is such a talented scorer it's not often she finds those nights. Was there a team effort to wrap your arms around her and pick her up?**

SIERRA JOHNSON: Yeah, for sure. Even Oright after the game I told her. She was emotional. I do a lot for this team and it was time for somebody else to step up and us to figure out way to do it without her. Definitely her presents on the court but we let her know we got you the whole game. Still figured out a way to put the ball in the basket.

I think it was just a team effort and we had to stay connected, and together. Coach tells us a lot to stay expected and that was the main thing.

**Q. Sajada, for you, what there was a point -- obviously making that late run in the late third, fourth quarter, was there a point where the team said, this game literally could not have gone less our way early on, but you still found your way to work your way through. What was the message at the team level to keep that converse going and pushing late?**

SAJADA BONNER: Coach always says survive the low, ride the high, and we were just trying to survive the low. We were able to stay close and finally able to make some shots and press and be us, and I think that's what kept our spirit a little bit.

**Q. Your season coming to a close tonight, Sajada I will start with you, what has this season meant to be able to go back to back NCAA tournament and get that win in the First Four last year, able to make it all the way back with a really great season? What does this season mean to you, you and I guess Sierra.**

SAJADA BONNER: This season meant everything to me.

Presbyterian 49, Sacred Heart 42

JESSICA MANNETTI: Yes, what a game. I think it was a really tough battle for 40 minutes, I think both teams played great. A lot of the credit to Presbyterian. They came out really, really ready to start the game and did a really great job with their defensive game plan. I thought it was really different than one we had ever seen. And very smart considering.

So I was really proud of our team. We did a tremendous job rallying back from a deficit. Never quit. Never gave up. Stayed together. Just shots weren't falling for us today, but couldn't be more proud of our effort.

**Q. For both players, I guess take us through from your perspective what was Presbyterian able to do to kind of slow an offense that was coming into the tournament red hot?**

SIERRA JOHNSON: I think they had a good scout plan. They really keyed on Ny'Ceara Pryor and the things she's capable of and the things she's done a lot for this team.

I think they kind of sat in the paint and caused us to figure out a different way to put the ball in the basket.

In the second half we figured it out and did what we was supposed to, and just wish we could have did it in the first half.

SAJADA BONNER: Yeah, basically the same thing Sierra said. We didn't have a hot start. They were playing a totally different defense than we have seen in the NEC.



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I am big on the people you're around that makes the season great. I think the wins and going back-to-back was everything, but being around coach and my teammates made it everything.

The environment at Sacred Heart, there is none like it, so to be here was just a bonus. I'm so thankful for them, and there is a great group coming up again next year.

SIERRA JOHNSON: I think last year we saw what we were capable of, and this year it was just time to try to run through the conference, to be honest. I think everyone knew, our transfers and freshmen. Everybody bought in and had respect for each other and played together. Everybody wanted it.

I think we made history last year. We wanted to continue to do the same thing. So we have a lot next year for this group.

**Q. Coach, kind of leading off the same way I led off with the players, coming in so red hot offensively, what was Presbyterian able to do to throw you off your game and rhythm?**

JESSICA MANNETTI: I thought their game plan was really great. Ny is such a presence on the floor. She is unstoppable. I mean, even today on an off night she has 12 points and bunch of assists and great stats on her stat line.

Really trying to shut her down was a great game plan initially. I'll tell you, we took great shots tonight. In the first quarter I'm looking at the stat sheet going, we're taking tremendous shots. We took 16 shots in the first quarter and hit like three, four.

And just not being able to see some of the shots go in that normally go in, we couldn't find our rhythm. When we hit shots we can press. That's what Jada was talking about initially where we can really start to find our rhythm, find our footing, get our shooters feeling good about their open shots and opening up driving lanes to drive kick it to the paint, get to the free throw line.

I think Presbyterian keying in on Ny early was really big, and keeping us on one side of the floor was a really great game plan, especially when our shooters weren't hitting. It disrupted us a little bit. We're able to make some great half-court adjustments, but by that point you're playing a game of catchup, and that's always tough in an environment like this where you see a sea of blue all the time.

So the resilience was amazing in terms of how the team

responded. That initial game plan I think was really effective until we could figure out how to come out of it.

**Q. And it seemed to kind of reflect in the game stats, obviously 15 offensive rebounds. Gave yourselves a lot of extra chances.**

JESSICA MANNETTI: Yeah.

**Q. What was the messaging from you and your staff to the players to kind of keep pushing, keep pushing, even though the shots aren't falling?**

JESSICA MANNETTI: Yeah, so at one point, looking at the stat sheet, we shot 23 more shots than our opponent. You're thinking, man, couldn't find a way in 23 shots? In the third quarter we shut down the open three early. I said, that's it. That's enough. I'm tired of watching us jack threes and waste possessions early.

So we said, you have to work the ball. If we can get wide open threes in ten or less, let's take them. If you can't we're not taking the shot until we find our feet again and find our rhythm.

And then we started getting to the free throw line and making some great adjustments against some of their defender we are trying to key in on.

I think in those moments where you just have to find a way we did, which was great.

**Q. Sierra touched on it postgame talking to Ny'Ceara and picking her up. It's easy to forget she's a sophomore. What was your message to her postgame, towards the end of the game? She had such a frustrating start. Still, defensively was super active. What was your message as she gets into her junior year right around the corner?**

JESSICA MANNETTI: You know, for her and for the team, we knew this was going to happen at some point, right? For Ny, like she's such a special player. She's a once-in-a-lifetime player here at Sacred Heart. We know that teams are going to really key in to disrupt her.

Like Sierra mentioned, the team has to rally and we have to step up and support her. I think she really felt that support tonight when Presbyterian went on their runs and she couldn't find a rhythm. She felt the team had her back, or at least tried to have her back.

I think my messaging to her is, look, you're an unbelievable player. We'll help you find a way. We'll work in the off-season to just have you more prepared I think mentally

to say, hey, you put a lot of pressure on yourself, which she does. You should have seen her in the locker room. She was devastated. She always feels she can play better.

Sometimes you have to depend on your teammates a little more. I think we'll work with her throughout the off-season to say, we know you have our back all the time. We're going to help you through some struggles and give you some alternate options so that you can feel like you can still play your game even though another team might have a double or game plan or something different that you've never seen before to disrupt you.

**Q. You had mentioned yesterday taking the momentum from last year, learning lessons, bringing everyone back. Fast forwarding to now, what do you hope this team brings into next season to kind of keep building those foundations that you're looking for as a coach?**

JESSICA MANNETTI: I hope the team brings how connected they are. This team truly, truly invests in each other. That's a testament to how great they are as young women, right, in the holistic sense, the bigger than basketball sense that we talk about at Sacred Heart a lot. Bigger than just basketball players.

My hope is they can be culture carryover ambassadors to the next group. The transfer portal opened up the other day. We're portal shopping. There will be new players that will add value to the team. It's not just that tangible value on the basketball court. It's that bigger value as a person and part of our community.

For us, what I hope this will do, this momentum will do, is just give us great inspiration and motivation to continue to be that program that everybody expects us to be.

That doesn't mean we have to be perfect, but we always have to give everything we have and continue to try and make our university proud and be the best people we can be at the end of the day.

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