

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Mississippi State vs Illinois

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Illinois Illini

Shauna Green

Media Conference



It's just an unbelievable experience for our players and one that we're obviously not going to look at that right now, we're going to work on the present. But going forward, I mean, this is just, it's huge. We will. We'll learn a lot, but we like to learn from success instead of failure. But we'll carry on with that after the year.

Q. How has that relationship with Makira grown with you as a new staff and how important has she been to you guys in this?

SHAUNA GREEN: Like Makira said, it was that trust and the loyalty. She's one of the most loyal people that I know, and once she earns your trust, she's going to be there for you through thick and thin, and she's just that loyal person, which quite frankly nowadays, you don't get a lot of that loyalty in anything.

She's just -- obviously the play speaks for itself, but for me to now, this is my third year with her, and to see her growth every day, it kind of amazes me because I remember what she was like as a freshman. I remember even last year. We remember all the times where she's grown in areas.

I think that's why we coach. That's the fun part about it is to see the growth of players more so as people. The playing growth is fun, but to see the growth in leadership and as people is really fun to see.

Q. I know it's a shorter week than you had anticipated for healing, but any updates on Brynn and Jayla going into tomorrow?

SHAUNA GREEN: They're still day by day, see how they feel, but hoping for the best, like we always do. That was probably the only thing that I didn't like about the quick turnaround was in our position a couple more days of rest would have helped with some of our injuries.

But it is what it is, so it's still day to day.

Q. I know it was six months ago, but can you walk me through the dark scrimmage against Notre Dame, and what were your expectations walking into the gym and how maybe that changed immediately afterwards?

THE MODERATOR: I'd like to welcome Illinois head coach Shauna Green to the podium this afternoon. We'll get started with a few questions.

Q. You mentioned on Sunday the continuity where pretty much all of your rotation players have one or multiple years left. How big of a springboard is this season? Are there any parallels to '19/'20? I know the tournament was cancelled, but any parallels to kind of having that same core?

SHAUNA GREEN: No, not really parallels because we lost the '19/'20 year. We graduated some really key pieces in that year. Now, granted we followed up and won two championships after that, but we lost some really key pieces.

But the continuity here and going into next year and potentially with the COVID year with some of these guys potentially coming back for that, it's critical.

K.B. and I were actually talking about that just at the hotel right before we came over here while she was getting some treatment. We're sitting there talking about obviously we want to be in the moment and we're not looking to next year, we want to take care of business here, but we're just talking about this opportunity, this experience.

Throughout this whole year, everything was our first. This whole year, everything was our first with this group. Like any adversity was our first, any success was our first. Like they were still learning me, and I was still learning them.

Now just having been there, we were saying, hey, it's nice to learn while being in the NCAA Tournament, instead of sitting there at home being like, hey, this is what we need to do in order to get to an NCAA Tournament. This is the next step we need to take in order to get in.

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SHAUNA GREEN: I think our players would say the same, and I know you've heard me say it. I know you've heard in some post-game interviews that that point we talk about where I think we really believed was after our scrimmage with Notre Dame.

Going into it, to be completely honest, I really had no expectation. I did not know what to expect. I didn't know how we would compete. I didn't know how we would produce because it's different when you practice against each other and practice guys for months leading up to that, and then you have -- we knew Notre Dame was going to be a top ten team. We knew they were going to be good.

So then you have them coming into your gym with a brand new team, a brand new coach, a brand new system. Just the thing I take away from that scrimmage was our fight and our toughness and our resiliency. We were down, I think, 15, 17 points, I think, and we fought back.

So when we left that scrimmage, and anyone who knows our program and what I want our team to be about, it was the toughness that we showed. It was the fight that we showed. And everything else, I knew we would be okay with. But if we had that fight and the toughness to come back and never quit and keep working against a top team in the country, that's when I was like, okay, we have something here.

Look, these guys, we can do something special this year. It doesn't have to be next year or five years from now or whatever. That was the first moment I think for me that I knew -- I knew we had it. You think you have it, but then when you go into competition and battle against a top team, I think that's where we got our belief.

Q. What is it kind of about Makira that allows her to kind of shine in the big moments? What is it about her as a player that allows her to thrive in these kinds of moments?

SHAUNA GREEN: I think when the lights are the brightest is when she does rise up. You heard her say rise to the occasion, but that's that competitive spirit in you. That's the drive that you've got to have in you. Like most players, like this is what you have worked your whole life for, right? You're playing on the biggest stage. You're playing in an NCAA Tournament, and what do you have in you?

Those are the special competitors that you have on teams and that I've been blessed to coach is that, when the lights are the brightest, you're ready to go, and you compete. It may not be perfect, but she's going to go out there and she's going to battle and try to will us to win.

I thought she really rose to the occasion in the Big Ten tournament, her aggressiveness, her mindset, on both ends of the floor. She locked in defensively, and then she was super aggressive offensively. And we need her to be in that attack mode. When she's in attack mode and when she's that aggressive, when she's playing with that confidence, we are a much better team.

Q. Obviously a post battle for Kendall tomorrow. What have you learned about her ability to find her own and thrive as an undersized post this season?

SHAUNA GREEN: Again, Kendall, we talked a lot. We had a good conversation right before this because we covered all you guys' questions in our own conversation.

She is. I don't even think sometimes that people give her enough credit. She's, what, 6'1", Kendall, on a good day? Yeah, in basketball she is. So let's say she's 6 feet, and we're asking her to go and guard Holmes and Czinano and Jessica Carter tomorrow, and some of the best post players in the league are in our conference. Legit, we have some of the best post players in the Big Ten, in the country.

Yeah, I'm going to yell at her a lot about maybe boxing out and stuff, but I will never, ever, ever question her heart and her competitive spirit and her tenacity and her will to win, all those things. What she does at her size and able to produce, and now be a double double, which I knew she would be coming into this year, it's really remarkable.

I think that sometimes -- again, I'm so glad she got on All Big Ten team because she deserves it. I think sometimes we forget her size.

Q. Talking about seeing Makira in high school, what about her as a recruit stood out, and how did that relationship develop?

SHAUNA GREEN: She never responded to my texts quickly. Still doesn't, God love her. No, I'm just kidding.

As I told you guys, Makira is one that just her loyalty stands out. She had already committed to a school, and when that head coach had left, she decommitted. So it was a shorter recruiting process with Makira, and I think that one thing that probably stood out to her was just our unwavering consistency, I would say.

Like we were at every single game of hers in the summer. Wherever she was, we were. The relationship piece is big for us, and it's big for her because, again, she's a trust person, and if you don't have that relationship, then you're



not going to gain trust.

And I think just consistency, I think that's recruiting. Certain kids really value that, and I think she values consistency, and again the relationships and trust. That's just our relationship. We're going to have open conversations. Sometimes she's not going to like what I say. Sometimes I'm not going to like what she says. But I respect her, I love her to death, and I trust her. I trust her.

Q. Makira, Kendall, Gen, and Brynn, they've all played in this NCAA Tournament before, but how important do you view this past experience? They're some of the leaders on this team, but how much additional trust do you put on them in this environment?

SHAUNA GREEN: I think that experience does help in this, I do. But it's also the first that we're going through it as a group. I think that's different. I think that comes back to what Joey was even saying about the continuity piece, imagine what this will look like. You've got to have a first. You can't have multiple years if you don't have a first.

So I think that we'll lean on them for leadership, like Kendall talked about it, and Makira and Kendall both know this, that they're going to have to lead because they lead every day. It's not like, oh, now you're in the NCAA Tournament, now you've been there, now you have to step up to be a leader. They've been leaders since day one through it all.

Now we're just in this position. Yeah, it's a little bit brighter lights and bigger stage, but it's another basketball game. It's about us doing what we do, and it's about them being the best versions of themselves and the best leaders they can be. And I just challenged them this morning in our film session about that. We need their leadership. We need them to set the tone with energy and talk and the consistency in our core values.

But it's their first time in an NCAA Tournament with an Illinois jersey on and in the positions that they're in now and the leadership expectations that they're in now and being the key players. Everything to them is new. So that's also where I have to do a good job and our staff has to do a good job of leading them and making sure they're in the right frame of mind, that they're in the right mindset, so we can come out.

Again, go through this together. We're all in it together. This is our first time all together in this journey with Illinois in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. As a followup on Brynn, if she was able to get cleared late in the process here, would you be inclined

to let her go and play without much practice or without any practice at all?

SHAUNA GREEN: She's been able to practice a little bit here and there. So that's been a great sign. So, yeah, I will -- as long as medically and everything is fine and they say she's good to go, then -- we're kind of in that moment now where we're progressing her up for this. Again, that's where our playing got a little expedited with it being a little sooner because we're on a plan for the week.

Hopefully she'll feel good again today with what she's doing in practice, and she'll be ready to go tomorrow. We're never going to put anyone out there that doesn't feel confident or is not healthy. Again, she has to -- they've got to want to do it. But hopefully she'll be able to go.

Q. I guess this Sunday night, how late of a night was that for you preparing for Mississippi State, and what does kind of the last few days look like prep-wise?

SHAUNA GREEN: That's why I look like I look right now because we haven't slept much the last couple days. It was a late night. We were at the office. I don't know what time we left. I went home and continued to watch film until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore.

So we got a couple hours sleep on Sunday, and obviously we've been in prep around the clock. I actually feel really good with where we're at and how quickly we got into being confident on game plan, confident on what we need to do. Luckily a lot of the things they do, we've actually prepared for. They press some. We prepared the last month preparing for Maryland. They like to do certain other things. We've prepared, again, for Big Ten teams.

So a lot of what they do, it's nothing we haven't seen before. So I feel very confident in the process and how quickly we got to that.

Q. What's your favorite drill to coach at practice?

SHAUNA GREEN: What do you guys hate the most? Oh, yeah, D-Trans. I agree. I don't like to coach that either because you guys don't like it and then it usually ends up being a little ugly.

MAKIRA COOK: So compared to the summer when you got here very quickly, everything was scattered, and like you guys were just all over the place compared to now that this team is in the NCAA Tournament, how do you feel like stress level, joy level, of just seeing everything kind of come together even though we're still not done?

SHAUNA GREEN: You're better on that side than this

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side. You guys had better watch out. She's coming for your jobs. That was good.

I feel really good. Compared to the summer, compared to the first day of workouts -- and K.B. was there. I don't know if you remember. The first morning workout after the press conference and my second day on the job, it was bad. Thanks, K.B., you said it. I didn't know. I didn't know what the year would be. I didn't know how many games we could win.

Then we got the whole crew there in summer, and I remember that first team meeting. It was the most awkward team meeting because no one knew each other. Normally in a team meeting you have everyone -- at least there's just four freshmen who don't know each other. That team no one knew each other except for a few people. It was very quiet.

That's the thing that brings me the most joy, Makira, is how this team came together and the journey this team has been on and how quickly they've come together, and how much trust they've had with us and with each other. And to be sitting here ten months, whatever it's been, since we did all come together at Jupiter's that first night, we've come a long ways. We've come a long ways.

When I think about it from that big picture, it makes me really, really proud of the players because it was a quick journey that we got to where we're at. I'm so happy for them, and I'm so proud of them.

Q. So portal opened yesterday, and I'm wondering what your world is like when you're having to maybe keep an eye on the portal when you're in an NCAA Tournament and trying to prepare for that?

SHAUNA GREEN: It's part of it, so we're keeping an eye out for it. It's a little bit different this year because they put the time on it whereas last year you had already seen it when coaches left or resigned or whatever.

So I try not to think about it too much. I know the assistants, they're all over it. They're checking that thing. Like I was checking the NET during the year, and I told you guys I checked that more than the stock market, they're checking the portal the same thing. So anyone that's intriguing, I know that I will hear about it from them.

Q. What stands out about particularly -- I don't want to say bad, but that first post press conference workout, what do you remember thinking about that? That was kind of like the ground floor maybe of everything.

SHAUNA GREEN: I guess you've got to think about it,

right? That was -- I literally -- I mean, it's almost been a year because I just had finished our season. We just lost in the NCAA Tournament on Friday. This is probably Wednesday of the next week. I'm in a gym at a different school with different players and zero staff and Justin, who I don't know.

I'm like, why am I in Champaign, Illinois, in orange coaching this team? I had no time to process anything. It was boom, boom, boom, and now I'm coaching another team. That knows nothing about what I'm trying to do, has none of the groundwork or the fundamentals or all the things we pride ourselves on.

So the last practice, I had a practice three days prior to that, and it's a veteran team of fifth, sixth year seniors who know exactly what I want, and now I come in. The layups they were doing is not even a normal layup. They're doing all this crazy stuff. I'm like, okay, wait, we don't do that here. Shoot a normal one.

So put it in that, it was the extreme. It may have been different if I had a week or two of, okay, I'm going to be taking over a whole new team. I kind of know who these people are. I barely knew their names besides people I knew. When you look at it like that -- and they couldn't. They didn't make layups, and their footwork was all over the place because it's not what we taught.

It was like grade school workouts, which is always what we do in our program. The first week or two is like what you would do in a CYO practice because we're big on footwork and passing and doing layups and the fundamentals matter to us. So it was like literally one extreme to the other.

Q. You talked about that team meeting earlier, how did you kind of break the ice? Of the players, who broke the ice, and how did that kind of build?

SHAUNA GREEN: I don't think we broke the ice. I think you had to go through it. You have to go through some of those awkward times and the growing times, and I laid out what we're about and our vision and how we do things. And I put a lot of ownership on them to be -- I knew, if we didn't have relationships and they weren't tight off the floor, and had to build those and the trust off the floor, then we wouldn't have success on the floor, and I firmly believe that.

So I gave them ownership of this is our summer. I don't want to -- I don't believe that I can -- I can't do every -- you guys get together at 8:00 p.m. on Thursday. You guys do this. Then they're not going to buy into it. So I put the ownership on them of you guys have got to be together all the time and build that, and they really took ownership of

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that and really quickly like had those, built those relationships, and built some of that trust.

So a lot of it's on them, and it just is a process. It's all a process.

Q. You mentioned all of the turnover and new people coming in. How important was a person like Brynn who knew what she did at Dayton to maybe help with navigating a new scenario like you're in here in Champaign?

SHAUNA GREEN: Brynn was really critical because obviously we recruited her and we knew she fit our system perfectly. I really believed that the Big Ten suits her. She's a big wing four player, which she fits our four, like how we play our four perfectly. She can shoot it. She has great size. She stretches the floor.

Then she was familiar with our system. And then I just knew what type of person she was and the character and who she is at her core, and she works. So all those things, and I think that's where the biggest thing with why we had success in the portal is because every kid that we took we knew.

So I knew Brynn was going to fit us. Granted she didn't play that much as a freshman because we were so senior heavy at Dayton. She knew expectations, she knew standards, she knew system, and I saw her grow through that year. Even though it might not have showed in playing time, she had some really big games too.

So Brynn was huge, and look at her now. Now she's started pretty much every game for us, is a critical piece, and I think we see the value of her now that she hasn't been there either. She does so much for us besides making baskets. So we're anxious to get her back.

Q. Any changes on her health?

SHAUNA GREEN: She's day to day, like I said. She's been practicing a little bit here and there, so we're hopeful. It will kind of just be how she feels today.

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