

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Marquette vs Ole Miss

Friday, March 22, 2024

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

Ole Miss Rebels

Yolett McPhee-McCuin

Head Coach

Media Conference

MODERATOR: We'll now have Coach Yolett McPhee-McCuin step to the podium here. Anyone have a question to get us started?

Q. Sure. Coach, kind of recycle one I had for the players, what about the style of basketball that you've built this program with is suited to March in your opinion?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, it wouldn't be fair if I didn't give credit to Charlton C.Y. Young. He's an Associate Head Coach at Missouri, but before Missouri, he was a mentor for me at Jacksonville and he's a part of the Leonard Hamilton defense at Florida State. One day he just pulled me aside and he said, Yo, if you want to really be a tournament team, you've got to have a defensive system and right now you don't have one. And so he spent the whole summer with me, teaching me their system for Florida State men and I'm a student of the game, and I followed it to a tee, from how we play out of bounds to what we do defensively and we have come up with our own identity.

There are just one or two things we don't do that they do just because I just through when you think about men's basketball and the way men are built, there's some things that just didn't work for women's basketball, but the whole philosophy, our language, how we talk, how we think. That's the origin. We've been doing that since year three at Ole Miss and he said if you keep doing that, you'll be able to the deep in the tournament and the reason why is because it's very hard to simulate because it's a system. Usually when we play teams, we don't spend a lot of time saying, hey, with this action, we'll guard it this way. No, we have a way we guard actions, we guard ball screens, we guard -- and so that's where our players' confidence is built. So while some teams, and people do what works for



them, they change it for the opponent. We don't change our philosophy, which is to dictate and disrupt. Now that's Ole Miss Women's Basketball. They didn't call it dictate and disrupt, but when we started really buying into it, living it, we started saying, you know, this is what we're going to do. We're going to dictate and disrupt people on the defensive end and what they're trying to do offensively.

Q. Kurt, Associated Press. Tyia mentioned it was a bit of a shock coming from the Big Ten to the SEC, it was so much more physical. How has she handled that transition in your eyes and how valuable is the impact she's making?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, first of all, I want to tell you I'm glad I have a new contract because you made me nervous with that Madi question because she's a hot commodity in Oxford and I didn't want them to get any ideas. (Laughter) I'm just kidding. She would be a great coach and she has already let me know that I need to have a position for her when she's done playing basketball.

But, yeah, we've had 17 transfers in six years and so that is an adjustment for players that don't come up as freshmen through our system, but it's easier because we have a system. So most times when we have transfers come in, Madi, you know, the people that have been here say, okay, this is what we do and we put them in the front of the line and we start intrusion our defensive philosophy as soon as they get on campus.

I think the reason why it's difficult initially is because if you don't guard, you don't play. I let you know that when I'm recruiting you, but it's nothing like being sat down because you don't want to keep people in front of you. What I do love about our defense is that I think it builds character because it's something that you have to do that's challenging. Anything that's challenging, you have to have character, and everyone knows that in sports, when you score, that's what brings joy, right?

And so let's even talk about philosophy. I prefer to be on the defensive end for the last possession than the offensive end. So while one would hold the ball so that they can get the last shot, I prefer to be on the defensive



end, so, like, if we're on the defensive end to win a game, I'm way more calm than on the offensive end because that is who we are and that is what we do.

And I also want to mention this, too. While the Southeastern Conference, our play is physical, we play a clean style of basketball. A lot of coaches like to come in here and use that against us and I don't think it's in a positive way, you know, we're not bush league, we're not fouling you all over the place. We show our hands. We beat you to spots. We jump and block your shot. We have a system, so it's really clean and so because we speed you up and you fall, we didn't make you fall. We just sped you up.

And so I want to really make clear that Ole Miss Women's Basketball plays an aggressive but a very clean style of basketball that some people look as physical because we're in your face. You get what I'm saying? So you run all of this complex action and then when you stop, we're still there. Well, that's because we're athletic. That's because we use our hands. That's because we are confident in what we do, but I wanted to make that clear because sometimes it's used not in a negative light and that's just not true. We just meet you at the rim, and I know that's unusual for women's basketball, but that's how we play.

Q. We just heard Madi kind of talk about making the decision to be a leader. Obviously, you know, the okay has been positive but maybe not always easy for this team this year.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yep.

Q. Do you think you would be here had she not really made those contributions off the court kind of in the locker room?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, when you say here meaning?

Q. A seven seed in the NCAA Tournament.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Oh, shoot, I don't think we would be a seven seed without team 49. Like, this is really a group effort. It's one of the things that I've enjoyed our team understands, everybody understands how important their role is. From the person that puts out the markers more me to write out the board, because if that marker is dry, you just took five precious minutes away from me to write on the board and now I'm in a panic. So everybody understands their role. Obviously I have an appreciation for Madi. Madi believed in me when not a lot of people did. We were 0-16 when Madi committed and now she's

decided to give a fifth year, and that's not normal in today's -- in the sport today because of the portal. And so this young lady has started from the beginning to now and so when you talk about winning, I've won a lot of games, but just to see her up here and articulate in the manner that she did, and even Tyia who's been here two years, that's the win for me.

MODERATOR: We'll turn it over to a Zoom question here. If we can get it to work.

Q. Hi, Coach. Gabrielle Lewis, The Next.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Hey, Gabby.

Q. You mentioned this a little bit earlier about how the clean, calculated defense of Ole Miss. Do you feel like your team and the SEC are unfairly treated and portrayed and why do you feel like that?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: I think it's an easy out. I think sometimes it's a lazy narrative. I think it's a way if teams in the Southeastern Conference beat you, you can say oh, well, they play bush league. It's unfair. We held Stanford to 49 points last year. You know why we did that? Because teams in the Pac-12 did not guard certain people that they didn't think that they could shoot. You know what we did? We guard everybody. We were in everyone's face and it was shocking. It was not something that they're used to.

You know, Marquette the a great team, but I've watched every game they've played. No one has picked them up full-court. It's no secret, we play 94 feet, you know? It's shocking. It's overwhelming if you had -- not even UConn. It's overwhelming when you experience it, and we have to change that narrative.

In the Southeastern Conference, we're the most athletic, so sometimes I think we get officiated unfairly sometimes because it's a style you haven't seen, so, like, my players, we get beat up a lot. We can jump and we can jump over you and we can do things that not a lot of people can do, and so officials miss the call. I end up telling them a lot of times don't -- I know you're -- don't get caught up watching the beauty of what Marquesha just did. She got fouled, and I know it's beautiful that she glided in the air and then went underneath the basket, but someone hit her on the way and I know that we don't teach flopping. We don't fall all over the ground. We play basketball. We sit in front of you. We take a charge if you run over us. Sometimes we don't. Even in those moments, we wall up.

So, I think it's a lazy narrative. Let's look at last year. I mean, South Carolina got beat up by Iowa. I mean, they



came out with the report and said that, you know? But why didn't it get called that way? Because South Carolina is big, South Carolina is athletic. Same thing happens to us and it's very -- in the officials' defense, it's very hard to officiate because you do get caught up with us flying in the air and that kind of stuff, but that's why I'm going to use my platform to say we play a clean style of basketball, and most times, we get beat up a lot, we just don't cry about it.

So hopefully we will continue to show that in this tournament if we are fortunate enough to win and go deep, but starting on Saturday, tomorrow, I don't even know what day of the week it is. Is it tomorrow? If you told me it was Monday, I would believe it. So hopefully we get to show that tomorrow, that we're going to be in your face, but we're going to show our hands and we're going to be incredibly calculated with the way we play.

Q. Coach, did Snudda Collins travel here with the team? And is she still part of this program?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, Snudda did not travel with the team. Snudda decided to step back for a second. I mean, the timing couldn't be any worse (Laughter) if you ask me, but I support our players. Snudda is getting ready to graduate. She's been a part of the program. We did not have talks about her coming back like Madi and so, you know, I didn't know if that would be a possibility anyway and we support her 100%.

Q. Coach, you finished the season winning seven of the last eight games and Madi kind of talked about that turning moment, but from a coaching staff standpoint, what do you feel like changed in this team?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: I think what Madi said rings some truth. Probably a lot. This year has been very difficult. We come in ranked 12th. Expectations, you know my feelings about pre-season rankings. I don't know how they exist. But at the same time, we knew we were going to be good. We go to the Bahamas, we beat Arizona and Michigan and a good Howard team and then versus Michigan, KK tears her ACL, you know. That was a shock to our system and we didn't get to stop, we had to play. We were figuring things out as we go, kind of like Texas, you know. It was that big of a blow for us.

Then I play Madi at the point some and then we had Zakiya there and then we had Kennedy Todd-Williams at the point and it has been not only from a strategic standpoint a challenge, but emotionally. Anybody that knows KK Deans, she's a mini-me from her bravado, her persona, just how she moves, her swagger. It is on 100. So for us to lose that, it made people have to step up.

When we lost to South Carolina and then Texas A&M at home in the fashion that we did, Toddy got ejected because she had a tech and an intentional, I brought the group in and I said you guys have to make a decision right now. There are only two sides of this. There's a winning side and there's a losing side. It's not a Coach Yo side, not a team side. It is a winning side and a losing side. Choose. What I did for that whole week, we had a bye week. Every day I would show -- we would start practice with showing them videos of winning teams' press conferences so they could hear this is how winners talk. This is what winners do, this is how winners think.

It made Madi step up because KK was a crutch because she was just so confident. I mean, KK would be putting us on her back right now and while it was detrimental, it was the best thing that could happen to us looking hindsight, right? Because she got a year to see and watch how we play. She'll be back. And then Madi, Toddy, Qui, team 49 had to make a decision and they did and we won seven in a row because they started saying, okay. This is my job. This is your job. This is your job, and Madi, your job is to lead. No one wanted to tell her that. It was kind of strange. I said it's okay for you to tell her you want her to lead. It doesn't mean that she has to take all the pressure, but that's her role.

So everybody had a role, everybody bought into their role and that's what you're seeing and we were fortunate to play I think three games without Snudda because she had hurt her elbow and that helped us as well, so, you know, we're prepared to play with who we have.

MODERATOR: We'll go to one last question on Zoom here from Gabrielle Lewis.

Q. Coach, preseason you talked about how this team had high expectations for the tournament. They were already talking about a Final 4, but you said you don't believe in skipping steps. What are your players' expectations for the tournament? What are yours? And how are you grounding that to not get ahead of yourself?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: I think, first of all, that's why I love doing this, because young people have absolutely no fear and I think sometimes coaches, media, we give that off. I'm a parent, all right? Just funny side, I'm afraid of snakes, but my daughters, my 11 and 6-year-olds, they're not afraid of snakes. So if we go to a zoo, I go this way but I don't tell them to come with me. I let them go and pet the snake because I don't want to give them that fear because someone gave that to me. How did I know to be afraid of a snake? Someone told me to be afraid of a snake coming up. So what I won't do is kill their dreams.

As you go through life in a season, they become wise and it's almost to a detriment because they lose games, stuff happens, and now a fear is built. I don't want my team to have that, but at the same time, I want them to understand that if we want to get to the Final 4, we have to win four and the winning starts tomorrow versus Marquette, so we are present.

My one word for this year, shout out to John Gordon is steady. I don't get too high. I don't get too low. My focus is Marquette. That's my focus and what we have to do to dictate and disrupt Marquette not only on the defensive end, but the offensive end. I know y'all been talking about our defense, but look at our points the last seven games, we get a bucket, too. So just trying to decide, trying to keep them focused on the steps, what it takes and then seeing where we get to from it. Because last year we really only wanted to -- I would have been happy with just winning one more game than the year before, you know? But we started winning. It felt good. We enjoyed the west coast and voila, we send up in the Sweet 16, so I'm just here for the ride with the team.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach. Appreciate it.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you all for the questions as well. Ole Miss' practice will begin at 1:10. The first 15-minutes of that will be open to the media.

Hammond communications will post a recording of this press conference in the NCAA digital media hub at ncaa.veritone.com. Transcripts are provided by ASAP and will be posted shortly. Thank you for joining us.

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