

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Arizona State vs Virginia

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Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver Hawkeye Arena

Virginia Cavaliers

Coach Amaka

Agugua-Hamilton

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We're joined by Virginia head coach, Amaka Agugua-Hamilton. So from now on, she's just Coach. We'll get started with questions here on the far left.

Q. Yeah, Coach, I'm sure last week the preparation was not normal not knowing who you're going to play. Just tell me what happened when your name was called in the tournament. Was there a certain freedom that came over this group after Selection Sunday?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I was really confident that we did enough to be in, so I wanted to prepare our team that way. Last week we practiced as if we were -- obviously we didn't know who we were going to play but at the same time, we needed to get better. We had to work on ourselves. It was a great time to do it and we did get better. We came together, got better at some tactical things. Our urgency and things we need to work on, so that was great.

Then we were watching the show and we were the last name called. That was hard because we're sitting there kind of like okay, are we in? We heard our name called and it was just pure joy.

Q. Kymora's got a nice honor that came in today with academic -- oh, excuse me, with All-American honors potentially and just what has she meant to the team and just the honors that are coming in for her. How well-deserved are they?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: They are well-deserved. Mo -- we call her Mo. Mo is somebody that works. She really epitomizes what we say, grind now shine later. She's all about the work. She's putting all that work in



since day one, so she's talented but it's not just the talent. It's the drive. It's just wanting to master her craft and be the best version of herself that she can be. She's a student of the game.

Even if I'm putting in a new play and it's a play we ran two years ago, she'll remember it. I might change the name, hold on, didn't we call that? She's always the one that knows that. She has a tremendous IQ and she really wants to be a great teammate.

She's stepped up leadership-wise. Her game speaks for itself. It's just great to see her walking into her dreams. She's a hometown kid. She literally grew up less than two miles from our arena and she wanted to stay home and bring this program back into national talks and back into the NCAA Tournament championship and pursuant championships.

So to see her come here and live out her dream has been so gratifying for me. She deserves it. This team deserves it. A lot of these players came here to play with her and she's a player that can score the ball, but I think what makes her different is she's such a willing passer. She wants to make the right play. If you double her, which teams do all the time, she's not necessarily going to force a shot. She's going to make the right basketball play. There are some times we want her to take that shot but that's what kind of kid she is; very selfless.

Q. Coach, I think you have nine players with double-digit blocks. How much does that, for the opposing team, when you have so many different players that can block shots, how much does that give your defense that much confidence going forward?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, obviously we have bigs. We have quite a few bigs, and they've been great protecting the rim, but we also have guards that block shots, block jump shots. We really stress contesting, and so just if you're flying out there trying to contest, naturally you're going to get so tips of or blocks but I just wanted to -- especially with this year, we really wanted to get some fives in there, some bigs, some height, some length, some physicality and it's been easier to kind of play out what we



need to do in my philosophy, which is to have some rim protectors. So if you get blown by, most of the time our guards feel comfortable that our bigs will step up and at least wall up or block a shot.

It's definitely one of our strengths. We got to keep playing into that.

Q. I think one of the under-the-radar story lines of the late season, I'm you've seen it on film is how well Paris has been playing recently, especially in Duluth, I thought she was outstanding and in the home stretch of the regular season. Is there something to be said about her seeing the potential finish line? She doesn't know where it is, but that clicking her into another gear?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I mean, she's just playing with extreme urgency, just being really relentless and it's something that we have seen glimpses. We have seen it over her time here. She's battled quite a few injuries and she's had a bunch of surgeries since she's been at UVA. I think she's had three or four at this point. She never really was healthy enough to work on her game and was always in and out of surgery, always playing through injuries.

I feel like this year she finally had a stretch where she could get in the gym and work on some of her things fundamentally that she needed to get better at but the switch kind of flipped and she's playing with a lot of urgency. So her skill set got better but just the intent and the will not be denied mentality, the will to win has really, really increased. I would say probably since the last ten games with her.

So I love where she's at. I think she's willing our team and setting the tone with physicality and urgency.

Q. For you to make the NCAA Tournament now here at Virginia and building the program, just personally what does that mean to you to get to this level now at Virginia and then also a quick follow-up... any memories of Iowa or Iowa City in your time as an assistant in the Big Ten?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah. I'll answer the first question. I always say glory be to the highest for me. All the glory goes to God. I'm a faithful person, a God-fearing woman and I truly believe in his plan for me and everything that I'm doing. It's never really about me. It's about we have a group of young women that committed and fought for something that was bigger than themselves.

When I got to Virginia, this program was 5-22, coming off a

season of 5-22. Dead last in the ACC. I knew what I was walking into and I knew it was going to be a challenging job, but I also wanted to build it the right way. I wanted to build it with my culture. I wanted to build it with my standards and we had to rebuild a lot. We had to rebuild obviously the roster, the talent, the culture, but we had to rebuild the community, which we have and had back-to-back seasons now where we've broken season ticket records in the history of the program.

We had to rebuild resources. We had to rebuild everything. Excitement, all of that. It took some time but I wanted to do it the right way. I wanted to do it with some young kids. We were able to get Kymora young and early. We were able to get Olivia McGhee. We were able to get some of the ones we retained over the years. Paris Clark came in. Jillian Brown.

So I wanted to build it with a core group that could leave their legacy. We were able to do that, so just to see us get back to the big dance, obviously I know -- I'm a Virginia native. I know when the glory days were with Debbie Ryan and Dawn Staley and Wendy Palmer and Tammi Reese. All those players. So I know where this program has been and I see the banners every day, so I know where it's going and where we could get it to go. Matter of time before it really clicked. This is just the beginning. We're back in the tournament, but we're going to continue to build from here.

I feel blessed to be back in the tournament. I feel blessed to be part of the change here and leaving a legacy but I'm so happy and filled up watching our players and just the smiles and the joy that they feel bringing this program back to where we know it should be.

Oh, the second part. So, I was in the Big Ten for eight years, six at Michigan state, two at Indiana, and had quite some battles here. This fan base is awesome. They show up, they show out, they pack this place. Lisa Bluder was there all my years and I have tremendous respect for her and her style of play. There was a lot of great players that came through here but also she's a phenomenal coach. She was very, very difficult to guard and their sixth man and the fan base made it even harder.

So I know what kind of atmosphere this place brings but it's such a great environment for women's basketball.

Q. Coach, tomorrow's game against Arizona State, what are their strengths and can you talk about them a little bit?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I have a lot of respect for Molly and the programs she's built over the years. When I was at Missouri State as a head coach, she



was down the street at Drury. Had some really, really good years. But her teams are always physical. They defend at a very high level and there's no difference right now with ASU, so they're competitors. They're clicking, they play together.

You can tell they have really good comradery, but they defend. They defend. They're physical. They do it takes to win and they're a team that just never quits. They're really gritty and I think they just kind of emulate their coach in that way.

Q. On the flip side of that for fans in the area or people coming to the game tomorrow that might not be familiar with your style of play, what do you guys hang your hat on and what can we expect to see out of Virginia tomorrow? Hold up yeah, when we compete for 40 minutes and we are urgent and play together, we're a hard team to play on both sides of the floor. Defensively, when we're locked in, we're hard. Like he was talking about with blocks and rim protecting, our guards are guarding the ball better and things like that, but offensively, pushing tempo and playing in transition and just running our sets, setting the user screens and running our sets the way we're supposed to and executing on that end, we're a really good team. I think we've showcased that many times this year and that's why we're sitting in the NCAA Tournament right now.

I think people try to look at the couple times that we let games slip here or there or how we ended the season, but I'm just blessed that last week, I feel like we needed last week. I thought we got back to us. I thought we got better. I thought we came together and we're ready to play.

Q. So much new in this program. What helped bring them together, mesh them, maybe some things you might have done and ultimately an identity you guys rallied around.

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I think we do have quite a few new faces. We went into the portal. We really wanted to get size. We came out of the portal with five bigs. We did have some continuity with five returners as well and then we had a couple of -- we wanted to add some depth to our guard spot.

But people from all walks of life. We have international kids. We have kids from Virginia right down the treat. We have kids from Midwest, all over the place. They just clicked, honestly. Off the court, they've been very close and it was just about translating that on the court and making sure we have our comradery on the court. We do a lot of team bonding. We did last week as well. A lot of

things to put them in situations where they can be vulnerable a little bit and have fun a little bit outside of basketball.

Just trying to make them understand they have to trust each other. You don't know each other. You come in from the portal. We have one freshman who came in. We have returners, so you don't know each other as well. I think that's part of the battle, just getting them to know each other and understand. We talk about culture all the time. Culture wins and our culture is based on so many different things.

Obviously it is a family environment but that's kind of cliché. A lot of people say that so I focus more on culture. What goes into that with love, respect, loyalty, comradery, selflessness, giving. We talk about giving every day in so many levels and facets of that word. Synergy. So many different things we talk about there.

But that translates into grind now shine later. I heard Mo talk about that earlier because we say that after huddle. Our culture is the foundation of what we do, right? And the work is why we're going to get to the point where we can shine. So we talk about winning the day, winning that drill that translates winning a scrimmage and winning at practice and winning a game and winning each day and checking out those small victories along the way and celebrating those small victories along the way to get to your final goal.

We don't want to just focus on the last goal, we want to focus on the work that we can control to get there, so grind now shine later, that's why we say that, which we just changed yesterday to grind now shine now because it's post-season. That's what we say. We have it on T-shirts, we have it on everything.

Before the huddles before practice we say give like I was talking about earlier because that's been a staple from the time I was a head coach. I think if you're selfless and playing for your sister next to you and really bought in, you give energy and effort, you give yourself to them, you give yourself to your God, you give yourself to your family, things will come back tenfold.

Q. Coach, you mentioned going into the portal and getting kids there. I'm curious from your perspective on the recruiting side what does it take for a traditional high school junior, senior to really stand out for you and your program to get a look and what are you looking for in some of those traditional recruits to supplement all the action that can happen in the portal now?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I think when you can go in the portal and get someone that's college-ready and has had strength and conditioning and has been in that environment, it's a benefit for your program as long as they fit our culture. That's a big thing for us. You have to be talented enough and you have to fit our culture.

But I do still like the four-year kid out of high school. I like the maturation process of that. The fundamental reason I coach is the relationship building and the mentorship piece and watching them grow and evolve and become who they want to become and helping them through that process. I want to just be a four-year coach. I want to be a life coach. My thing is you can get that even with a one-year kid, of course, but getting kids at an impressionable age right out of high school and helping them grow is important to me.

But with just the changing landscape of collegiate athletics, we can't have a roster full of freshmen, in my opinion, but we would still like to recruit some and supplement the rest from the portal. If we're looking at a first-year kid, we want somebody who's going to be an impact kid, for instance, like Gabby White on our roster right now. She's a freshman that came in and has played minutes and helped us win games. That's the kind of kid we want.

No more of the maybe, you know, project kids where they have potential, they could maybe play by their unit your year. By that point, you should probably get that out of the portal but we go after the elite freshmen out there and we still want to bring some of those in.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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