

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Dakota State vs Utah

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

McCarthy Athletic Center

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

Coach Aaron Johnston

Tori Nelson

Paige Meyer

Media Conference

Utah - 68, South Dakota State - 54

THE MODERATOR: We have South Dakota State head coach Aaron Johnston, players Tori Nelson and Paige Meyer.

Opening comments, please, Coach.

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, congratulations to Utah. I thought they played well, well enough to win.

We did some really good things out there, just not enough to get a chance to play another day.

So outside of the game, just really proud of our team. We had an exceptional year. As a lot of teams do, had our share of adversity we had to battle through. And I thought the group did really well.

When you look at this year and think about it, how it relates to past years, this was exceptional for us, no matter what we had to deal with.

So really proud of the whole group. Tori was a great senior for us and a huge part of what's made us a great program for the last several years. And I'm sorry we couldn't get one more win for Tori in the NCAA Tournament. But she was a huge part of our program, a huge part of our success this year.

THE MODERATOR: Open it up for questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Tori, what went into that 17-0 run? It felt like that



first quarter, maybe a little bit of jitters, but second quarter you turned it around. What went into that?

TORI NELSON: Yeah, I think that first quarter we were just kind of on our heels, a little nervous going into the game. And I think we did a good job of settling in, especially offensively, just being more confident in what we were doing.

I think we just took it upon ourselves to find more energy, find a little extra edge, and I think that really contributed to that run.

Q. Paige, you did a lot of the ball handling work, as usual, but just what kind of a difference maybe pressure-wise did you notice from Utah? It felt like maybe it took you a minute to settle in, but once you did, you did start to look comfortable again. What was going into those early struggles?

PAIGE MEYER: They're a really great defensive team. They play with a lot of physicality. So I think getting used to some of that throughout the game. As Tori said, as the game went on, we kind of settled in a little more.

Q. Paige, battling back, it seemed like every time they made a run in that second half, you guys had an answer to keep it within striking distance. What went into that resilience in the second half?

PAIGE MEYER: The second half we came out with a little more confidence. Tori being our senior leader that she has been all year, she had big shots for us. That got us going. And I think everyone was just ready to make a play when they got the ball.

Q. Tori, it seemed like for you, you really kind of powered the offense early on in that 17-0 run. What kind of was your mindset to spark the offense?

TORI NELSON: Yeah, I think my teammates just got me the ball when I was open, and I was confident enough to take those shots.

And I've been fortunate to play in a couple NCAA



Tournaments, so I think my experience was able to help us in this game and kind of settle everyone else down too.

Q. Tori, obviously you'll be the lone senior leaving the team and everything, but just as far as it's been such a tough year for you guys, you've had to overcome so much. What are you going to take away from this, being your last year and thinking about just how much you've had to overcome but still having that typical South Dakota State success that you guys have year after year? Will you remember this a little bit more fondly just because of how much adversity you guys have overcome?

TORI NELSON: Yeah, I think it's kind of hard to compare. I think every year is really special. And obviously this year we did face a lot of extra adversity that maybe, you know, others we haven't.

So I think maybe just as a senior this year has been really rewarding and a bit more special for me to be able to do it with this group of girls and as a senior.

And so, yeah, I'm just going to miss it.

Q. Toughness is a word that's come up a lot. The Utah players and coaches that were just here a minute ago talked about the toughness that your team has exhibited. So this is kind of for anybody. If you just elaborate a little bit on the toughness that has allowed you to get to where you are with all the injuries you guys have put up with and to find yourself down 20 there in the first quarter or early in the second and battle your way back into that ball game, what allows you guys to find that toughness on such a consistent basis, play after play, for 40 minutes over the course of an entire season?

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, I think we talk a lot about just effort and executing. And I think sometimes maybe shots aren't falling on offense, but if we're playing tough and giving effort, we can always turn that around.

THE MODERATOR: Student-athletes, you're dismissed. Thank you.

Open to questions for Coach.

Q. Aaron, what do you think led to that difficult start there in the first quarter?

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, you know, Brooklyn's two fouls didn't help. That was, to me, the big part of it. We just run so much through her. And then all of a sudden not to have her.

A couple of missed shots, a couple of turnovers. But I really think those two fouls. And they certainly could have been fouls. I'm not saying it was the wrong calls, but that just kind of changed things.

I thought Brooklyn did a great job the rest of the half, coming back in and steadying herself. And you could see when she's on the floor, we're a better team.

I think there's probably a little bit of jitters. Tori and Paige really are the only two that have had a lot of NCAA Tournament experience, and I thought maybe our youth showed up a little bit early.

But we somewhat kind of righted the ship there as the half went on. We had some good runs in the second, but we just didn't -- we weren't quite good enough defensively or offensively. We were still good, but just not quite good enough on either side to really get where we want.

Q. Coach, kind of like he asked Paige and Tori, your program is often praised for that toughness. And during that 17-0 run, what was going through your mind? I'm sure you made the right adjustments and Xs and Os and stuff, but just in terms of looking at the difference in your team between that first quarter and then down the stretch in that second quarter, what was going through your mind as you watch your team fight back like that?

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I mean, I think we had some good possessions the first quarter. Not great. We did miss some open shots that you have to make. And we didn't shoot the ball great from the free-throw line. So there's some things like that that started to go our way.

Toughness, as you ask that question, that kind of thing for our team, I'm not going to speak for others, that comes from people, caring about people, caring about your teammates, caring about the school that you're at.

And it comes from connections. Because if you don't have that love or connection or care for people, most of the time, when things get hard, you quit. That's just the way the world works. You move on to something that's easier. You don't want to push through, persevere. You want to give up.

So whether it's dealing with injuries getting in a game like this when things don't go our way, the team really care about each other. A lot of coaches say that, but I think our team shows it with how hard they play all the time, the way they compete for one another.

Yeah, they're trying to win a game, yeah, they're trying to score some points when it doesn't look like it's going our way, but they care about each other. And that creates toughness I would say.

Q. What would you say you learned the most this year? It's been a year, probably just looking through your history, probably been a year like no other for you. But what do you think you've learned the most, and how do you think you have grown as a coach having been through this?

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I don't know learn or not, if that's the right word. I hope every year as coaches we always learn and grow, what works, what doesn't work.

Rather than say learn, I think just this year continued to emphasize no matter what's going on in college athletics, because it's kind of a crazy time, it's still very much a people business.

And just a reminder of this year is the importance of caring for and about people. As they deal with injuries and trying to win games and all the things they have going on in their lives, our number one job is to help position them to be successful.

And a lot of things go into that. But it's just that reminder that they're people. They're just young adults doing the best they can. And our job is to try to help them as best we can.

Q. Can you talk about Tori Nelson, just how much she means to you, the program, giving you so many great years, consistency? Can you talk about Tori Nelson.

AARON JOHNSTON: Tori has been one of those consistent ones. We've graduated a lot of really good players the last several years, some of our all-time greats when you look at numbers.

And Tori has always been there, and she's been a part of some incredibly successful teams. I know I've said this before, and I keep probably getting the number wrong, but I think she's only lost four conference games in five years of basketball.

That says a lot about a person and just how competitive they are and how driven they are and how willing they are to fit into what we're asking them to do.

And, yeah, there's a lot of five-year players out there right now because of what we all dealt with a couple years ago, but there's not a lot of five-year players that are at the same school for five years. I think that's a really cool thing

about Tori. I'm glad she's one of our all-time greats. I'm glad she's an all-time winner. And wish we had a couple more wins for her. But she should really reflect positively on her exceptional career on and off the court I would say.

Q. We talked about that first half where difference of two quarters, what do you feel like if difference down the stretch in that second half? It was pretty even entering the halftime break.

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, it was just -- both teams played hard. You talk about our toughness, Utah is pretty tough too. They played hard, and they compete. Both teams had to work hard for good shots, good looks.

So the offense wasn't just a constant, it was a battle, a physical battle at times. And it just was hard to find open space and open shots for us.

And I think that goes back to their physicality, their length, their quickness. They just defend really well. We just had stretches where we didn't score consistently enough.

At times when we were able to get to the free throw line, it was really helpful. Other times, we probably weren't good enough in our half court execution to really hang in there with them.

But we defended well. They're hard to stop. They have a lot of weapons, and they made some really big shots that we just couldn't match up with I would say.

I think we're better team than we showed tonight. But Utah is awful good. They're going to be a tough point for us no matter what.

Q. You mentioned in your opening statement just the challenges that this team has overcome, and one of the most challenging seasons. When you reflect back on this year, what are you going to think of?

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I'll think back to we had just another great year. And just continue to remind this group for the next several weeks and the rest of their career that they were enough this year. Because that was kind of the big challenge.

When you go through injuries to starters, the questions come all around, whether they come from yourself or whether they come from people, how are you going to do this? How are you going to be good enough?

And just the reminder that that group was enough. Everyone out there was enough to have a great year, win a lot of games and play well. Not quite well enough to win.

But as a team, as people, as competitors, and a talent level, they were absolutely enough to be another great team at SDSU, and they should feel really good about that.

Q. A little bit of a dovetail off that Coach, but obviously you've had tournament runs, won games, and certainly with what could be coming back next year there could be deep runs ahead. As you move forward, is this going to be a year that you'll point to with incoming classes, incoming groups and say what this team did, overcame, this is the standard for what this program is about?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah. I mean, I think each year we just kind of move forward with the year. We try not to compare too much. I want next year's team to be their own team, just like I wanted this year's team to be their own team. We didn't compare this year's team to last year's team.

We have expectations for how we want to treat each other, how we want to communicate, function as a team. But the rest of it is all up to next year's team. And we'll get to that here in a while, and that will be a chance to write their own story.

But, again, this year's team was everything that we needed them to be. They were phenomenal when you look back at their record, their stats, what we achieved. They're amazing, and that's really all they really need to think about right now.

Thanks, everybody.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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