

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oregon vs Vanderbilt

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Shea Ralph

Media Conference

SHEA RALPH: First of all, we're very excited to be here to be in my home state of North Carolina. Pretty cool. Especially, my uncle played football here.

I was just telling these guys, the last time I was at Cameron I was an assistant at UConn and Chelsea Gray was a point guard here. My niece was six years old. My daughter is six years old. It's kind of funny how life is a full circle.

I've been telling the players, since the moment that we got selected to this region and we knew we were coming here to play Oregon, that the most important thing is right now, to be where our feet are, to take full advantage of the day we have today, the media, the practice, the experience to prepare for the game we have tomorrow and that's it, to focus on that. The most important game of our season right now is Oregon.

We're very excited to be here. We're very excited to play. We know we've earned this opportunity, and I'm looking forward to us playing our best basketball of the year.

Q. When you first recruited Mikayla, what kind of impact did you think she could have? Did you think she could turn into this this quickly?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: That's a great question, and it's one I get almost every day. We knew that she was special. We knew that she had the capability of impacting our program in a way that maybe we hadn't seen yet from a recruit we had brought here, but you're never really sure.

I think the first time we realized that the year was going to be a special one was when we started our workouts in the summer and we recognized her level of play, her confidence and competitiveness, her will to win. Those are all variables.



You can tell skill and talent. You're talking to kids, you just never know how the transition is going to go. The way that she came into our program elevated our program, elevated everybody else on the team, made everybody else better.

She's still a freshman. She still has a lot to learn, and that's important to note. But I think bringing her in and the way that she approached not only basketball but Vanderbilt, the community, her teammates, her coaches, has elevated our standard.

So the result of that is the things you're witnessing now on the basketball court. But it exists in every other area too, in the classroom, in the community, in the locker room, in our offices, in the interactions we have with our players.

That's a credit to Mikayla, but also to her teammates because they also came here to win. And she was a huge piece that we had that was missing, and we're very grateful that she's a Commodore.

Q. You played in a really good conference. You coached in a really good conference back in the day in the Big East. Now you're coaching another really good conference. How much does it help prepare you guys for what you have in front of you playing the SEC with so many good teams and so many different styles that you have to play against?

SHEA RALPH: You always have to be careful as the coach answering that question because you want to put your team and your conference and everybody in a great light. But I will tell you that from the outside looking in into the SEC for so many years, you're like they beat each other up, they do this, it's Armageddon. That's not true. It absolutely prepares you.

You've got to go into every game knowing that game is incredibly important for your season if you want to compete for an SEC championship or put yourself in position to compete for an NCAA championship. You have to prepare like you're playing in the Final Four, every single game you play in conference.

So, first of all, it teaches your players how to truly prepare.



The way it's Thursday/Sunday or Thursday/Monday, it's what you see in the NCAA Tournament, two really tough games back to back. You have to learn how to prepare intelligently. You have to learn how to recover intelligently.

The other thing it does, it exposes you. So everything you suck at, you're going to find out from January to March, and then you're going to have an opportunity to fix it before you get to play in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. You've experienced March Madness a lot as a player, as an assistant coach, but now back-to-back seasons taking Vanderbilt here. What's it like to be able to lead your own program to this moment?

SHEA RALPH: It's awesome. I mean, I don't know that I ever -- this is how I'm built. I never thought we wouldn't be doing this. I expect us -- if it were up to me, I was pissed the first two years when we didn't get to come here. But it really isn't about me anymore. And that is the difference between coaching and playing.

So when I was a player, I only got to play in one NCAA Tournament. I was injured, I think, I was injured all the other ones, went to the Final Four and won a championship.

But these kids, a lot of them, this is their first time. A lot of them, this is their first and their last time to be able to do something so special. Not a lot of players, not a lot of teams get to come do this.

I've won my championships as a player. I experienced this. For me, it's about making sure that our kids have the best experience possible; that they're the most prepared, that the things we talk about doing with them when they came here as recruits are the things that we're doing and accomplishing it, so that in 10 years they can look back and say this was one of the best experiences of my life.

It's important for me, but it's also one of the coolest things in sports ever. I would be telling a lie if I didn't say I was super excited as a coach and as a human being just to be here.

Q. Last year it was kind of a whirlwind of 24 hours after you're selected you're already in Blacksburg. How do you think these last couple of days have given you a chance to prepare a little bit better and how have you seen your team react since being selected?

SHEA RALPH: Another step in the right direction. So we weren't in the First Four, and that obviously gives you a leg up because you're not scrambling around, you get to rest and recover, get to prepare a little bit more, get to be

home, get to go to class at Vanderbilt; that's important.

It's just another step in the right direction. And I know our kids are excited about it. We've put ourselves in position to do this, though. And that's why the full body of work is important. That's why playing in the SEC is important and competing to win every game is important because you have to put yourself in position to be where we are right now.

Now it's important that we focus on that only and that we take full advantage of it. I love it. I love it for our team and hopefully we'll continue taking those steps forward so in a year or two we'll be hosting.

Q. Mikayla gets a lot of attention, rightfully so, but Khamil put up a lot of good numbers this year for you guys, helped you win big games, how important is she to your success and the foundation you're trying to build at Vanderbilt?

SHEA RALPH: Thank you. We do have quite a few kids who garner a lot of attention. Mikayla and Khamil being two of the most. And they're our youngest players. So the cool thing about our team is you have to have a certain amount of kids to understand what they're capable that serve a certain role depending on the day and you have to have some depth.

Why Khamil is important because the style of basketball we play. She's a 6'2" basketball, makes us super versatile offensively and defensively, and she's really young. So all she really knows is competing.

So that's been fun to kind of help her mold her game. She's only been playing basketball for six years, but when you put the right pieces around her, I think Mikayla has helped her elevate her competitive mindset. When Khamil plays with a competitive mindset, we're tough to beat, when you add Mikayla and Iyana Moore playing the way she is right now and when Jordyn is healthy on the floor, when we're not in foul trouble and when we can play and stick to our identity. That's what Khamil adds to our team.

So we have all these other great pieces as guards. We did lose Sacha Washington at the beginning of the year, which provided like an opportunity and a void, kind of, in that post position, which isn't really Khamil's natural position, but she's embraced it and become a better player. As a result, we've become a better team.

Q. How big is it now for the sport that you guys get the financial units that the men get? Because at the time you were at UConn you probably would have made millions of dollars at that school compared to what you

have now. And all the stuff that's going on in coaching now with NIL and other things that you didn't have to deal with years ago, what would make a coach want to get into coaching now? It's not just Xs and Os, it's other --

SHEA RALPH: Can we just sit here for a while?
(Laughter).

The first question is a really important one because now we're revenue-generating. Now we're revenue-generating sport. And that is the goal. It's also, in terms of equality, and we're decades behind the men's game in general, but as we continue to provide better basketball, to provide an entertainment experience for everybody, to elevate our game and now we get these opportunities to earn revenue, I mean, the sky's the limit, really, and I love being part of it because my mom -- I don't know if she's in here -- but she had four different coaches in four years. I think she actually drove the van to their games. So I get to hear those stories.

I'm coaching young women who are going to come hopefully be coaches or play in our sport at the pro level and make a living for a long time. I have a daughter who wants to do the same thing. I get to be a part of moving this sport forward. This is a huge part of it. We've earned it. That's why it's important. We're continuing to move the sport forward and laying the foundation for a better experience for those that follow us.

Getting into coaching, it's probably much like anything else: The landscape is going to change. The world is changing, and you just have to have a passion for it and control what you can control. All the craziness, we don't really have any control over that.

You do have control over where you work, for the most part, and the leadership that you work for. And that's why I would say, if you're going to come to Vanderbilt then you're in great hands. As a coach at Vanderbilt, the people that we get to work, Candice Lee, our chancellor, they're invested in making sure we're competitive in the landscape and clearing the path for the coaches so we can do our jobs well because at the end of the day the job is to educate and mentor.

If you're careful, if you put winning at all costs in front of that, then you're not a coach. You're not. So I would encourage people that are passionate about basketball and are passionate about educating and mentoring young people, because it is so important not just for the four years that they're in college and they're winning basketball games or championships, but for when they leave and they have to be a productive part of society in some other role,

we need them to be ready for that. We need that.

We need coaches to want to get in. And it's one of the main reasons I chose the leadership position so that I could provide that experience not only for my staff but for my players.

If I didn't do that, then I wouldn't be honoring the people that did it for me. And so I would say that it is the greatest profession in the world to me, but make sure that you're doing it for the right reasons and that you're doing it with and for the right people.

Q. You just mentioned Iyana Moore. And at the SESC tournament you were saying she's playing some of her best basketball right now. How important is she to your success going into March where she experienced this kind of moment last year?

SHEA RALPH: You asked and almost answered that question. It's important because she's been here before. Losing Sacha hurts right now because Sacha experienced this. Jordyn Oliver has experienced this.

But Iyana Moore is a huge piece of our veteran leadership and being able to have her calm and poised and collected playing a high level of basketball calms everybody else down on our team and provides kind of a, hey, this is the direction we're going, a leadership voice on the basketball court.

Those of us that have been doing this a long time know that player-led teams, they go a lot further, and they're going to accomplish a lot more because you've got to have that belief on the court and then you have to have the intensity that it takes to compete in March. She knows both of those things. She's been there before. She also knows what got in our way last year when we lost to Baylor.

Her playing the way that she is right now with the voice that she has is an incredible piece of what we're hopefully able to accomplish in March.

Q. You have been in the tournament last year. You missed it the first two years. For you and for the returning players such as Iyana Moore, what was last year's experience like and how do you think it will guide you to this run?

SHEA RALPH: Last year was a great experience, number one, because it was a step in the right direction. But I think if I could define it very transparently for all of you guys, I think it was more of a "we're happy to be here kind of feeling." We're very happy to be here.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

We were ecstatic to get in. We were not sure if we were going to get in or not. We got into our First Four game and we were happy to be there and we beat a very good Columbia team. But about midway through the third quarter the kids on the bench and on the court realized we had not prepared for the moment against Baylor, that we just didn't have enough to win that game.

I think it taught us a very valuable lesson, not only about preparation in March, but preparation in June, July and August and the mindset that you have to have to be a championship team.

Both sides of those were true. We're very happy to be there. We were excited to be in the NCAA Tournament, but I think it taught us a valuable lesson to be better prepared for this year.

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