

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Vanderbilt Commodores

Shea Ralph

Jordyn Oliver

Media Conference

Oregon - 77, Vanderbilt - 73

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the Vanderbilt Commodores. We have with us Shea Ralph along with student-athlete Jordyn Oliver.

Coach, the floor is yours.

SHEA RALPH: First, credit to Oregon. I thought they played really well today. They shot the ball really well. Then credit to my team and our players and the growth that we continue to have.

Obviously not the result we wanted, but that doesn't take away from the season that we had and the position that we put ourselves in. I think right now, especially when you're younger, it's hard to see that. So our locker room is struggling a little bit.

My hope is that, as leaders and coaches and people that understand the value of struggle, that they see when they get through this moment, the growth that they've had. And that our team has had and that our program has had, and that they know that we as coaches and our Vanderbilt community, and hopefully some people across the women's basketball community who have watched that growth, can appreciate the fact that these kids believed in themselves and me and my coaching staff, and more than anything, in Vanderbilt basketball.

When we took this over almost four years ago, this program wasn't even close to where it is now, and that is a direct result of the kids -- this one in particular, that's why she's here, Jordyn Oliver in particular -- the belief and the commitment that they made to me and our program.



And I can't thank them enough for that. I can't thank her enough for that. We are not the same team, I'm not the same coach without Jordyn Oliver.

So as much as I think we've helped them, I speak for our entire staff in that they have made us better people and coaches. I'm grateful to have been on the journey. I'm sad that it's over, but it is just a moment, and we'll continue the march.

THE MODERATOR: Questions in the room for Jordyn.

Q. Jordyn, you guys erased a 19-point deficit, that big fourth quarter comeback. What worked for you all in that fourth quarter that maybe wasn't earlier in the game?

JORDYN OLIVER: I think the biggest thing we talked about during halftime was getting our defense to translate to our offense. I feel like we picked up our defense in the fourth quarter, and then we got offense going.

I feel like we always start on the defensive side, then offense gets going for us for sure.

Q. What was your approach to that overtime, especially after Mikayla, Khamil, and Leilani had all fouled out?

JORDYN OLIVER: We've got 14 people on our team for a reason. One person goes down, the next person steps up. I feel like Coach Ralph has been teaching us that. It was a bummer when they fouled out, but we knew that the next person coming up was going to step up for us.

Q. Shea just talked about what you mean to her, but what does Coach Ralph mean to you, and what was it like playing for her for a few years?

JORDYN OLIVER: You all are going to make me cry here on this podium. Coach Ralph took a chance on a kid. When I left this university here, I didn't know if I wanted to play basketball anymore. I remember the day Coach Ralph called me, and I was like, where's Vanderbilt? I sat on the phone with her for an hour and a half, and I said that



woman's going to be my coach.

Last year she stuck with me, I was a little hard headed, and this year I grew. This woman has done everything for me. I told her, what, like a week ago, I'm forever in debt to Coach Ralph because she believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, and I just love her so much.

Q. You have meant so much to this program both on the court and culturally. What has the experience with Vanderbilt been like for you, and how are you going to take this into the next chapter of your life wherever that may be?

JORDYN OLIVER: I love Vanderbilt honestly. Between Coach Ralph, Dr. Lee, the diversity here is amazing, how they accept us for who we are. They love us for us. They love J.O. for J.O., and I can't wait to take that into the next steps.

SHEA RALPH: She wants a job.

JORDYN OLIVER: I want a job here. That's how much I love Vanderbilt. Hopefully I'll be here because that's how much I love Vanderbilt, and I want to keep working with our program and building this legacy that I left.

Q. First of all, Jordyn, congratulations on what was a great collegiate career. You've talked about how special Vanderbilt is to you. You spent some time at Baylor and spent some time at Duke, but what is it about Vanderbilt as a program and as a school that does hold such a special place in your heart?

JORDYN OLIVER: Firstly, those are two great institutions, as I'm sitting in the building of one, but I think the difference is Coach Ralph. Like I said from the beginning, she holds a special place in my heart. She is literally my second mom. Coach Ralph gets us going. Without Coach Ralph, we wouldn't be Vanderbilt Women's Basketball today. So it's all a credit to her.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. You're free to go.

JORDYN OLIVER: Love you, Coach.

Q. Shea, what was it that kind of went south for you there, especially in that first half? And then what was it that allowed you to make the comeback in the fourth quarter to force overtime?

SHEA RALPH: It's a good question. It's one that I'll probably think about for a while. Transparently, I think the way that we showed up today, both in the first quarter and

the second -- I'm sorry. The first half and the second half was what we've seen all year.

We've had one team that plays whether it's -- you know, you can attribute to whatever. Today I thought we looked a little bit nervous, but I intentionally tried to make it feel loose and free. But we do have a young team.

Coach Tom, my husband, tells me all the time to relinquish the illusion of control. Is it making sure that we're prepared but that we're also feeling light and free?

And some of these kids have never been in the NCAA Tournament, and hopefully will come to many more. Some it's their first and last. Some, their college career is ending in this tournament, and I think you saw a little bit of that in the first half.

I also think for whatever reason this team likes to fight out of a hole, and we dug ourselves a pretty big one. Then we showed up like the team that I truly believe we are for most of the second half.

Unfortunately, we ran out of time, and we had some pretty key people sitting on the bench in moments where it would have been helpful, more helpful to have them out on the court.

I know enough about basketball in March to know that most of what you learn is in moments like this, is in like the struggle and the absolute suck of it because I feel like we underachieved. Then I know, when I look at my team and I look at where we're going, that we haven't, but that's what it feels like when you know you're capable of playing like we did in that second half for an entire game. Then it wouldn't have even been an overtime game, I don't think.

Again, credit to Oregon because we didn't play that way, and they took full advantage of that.

Q. Coach, one of the reasons I was really excited to be at this game was that I grew up in Fayetteville, and I graduated from Terry Sanford high school, and I remember watching you play.

SHEA RALPH: Oh, gosh.

Q. I know this wasn't the outcome that we wanted, but what does it mean to you to come back and play a game so close to home?

SHEA RALPH: It means everything. I was so excited when we got the draw to come here. My mom was not. My mom went to North Carolina, so that was kind of an issue for her. But my uncle did play football here at Duke,

and I grew up right down the road.

For those of you that don't know, Fayetteville is like an hour and a half, like my entire family's here.

I wouldn't be the person I am without the things that -- the people that I grew up with, the things that I went through in North Carolina. It's great to be back here, and I'm also really happy to be representing Vanderbilt in a new phase of my life, kind of full circle for me as a player.

She talked about her being stubborn. I was probably the most stubborn player of all time, both in high school and in college. But all of those moments that I just talked to you guys about, and a lot of them were in high school, made me the coach, I think, and the person that I am now. It's exactly why I do what I do.

So it's kind of neat to be here. I would have liked a better result, but being in North Carolina will always be special.

Q. Coach, you mentioned how you have a young team. I'm just kind of wondering sort of the impact of something like J.O. who's -- I think this is her sixth season in college basketball, for all the injuries -- and how she sort of helped you lay the foundation for what the future is to come for this young team?

SHEA RALPH: There's layers to that. The first is that, when J.O. came to school here, she completed her second season, she was -- had been at Baylor, had been at Duke, high achieving programs at the time, and then also been in a McDonald's All-American.

When people look at the additions we're making to our roster, they see these things, and they're like, oh, I wonder why she chose there, so she helped lay the foundation in that way where now, because she chose to come to Vanderbilt when she could have gone anywhere, people are starting to turn their heads, number one.

Number two, she's just a really great human being, so that helps us now recruit other really great human beings and other players, whether they're in high school or they go into the transfer portal, that maybe just didn't find the right fit the first or second time. Then she can talk to them about what we've been able to do here, how she has contributed to that, and then be a leadership example and voice on the team and in the locker room.

As coaches, you have got to have that. I need somebody in there that has my back and that talks to the younger guys about how they're growing and what they need to learn. I've been through this before. You're going to be okay and take a deep breath, or kick them in the butt a little

bit. She is that. She is the coach in the locker room.

The last piece of it is there's no way that we're the team we are without her. She's got the highest IQ on our team. She has somewhat of a limited skill set because she can't shoot outside the free-throw line, and we paid for that today, but we don't win games without her on the floor. She moves the ball, she screens, she defends. Whatever physical limitations she has, her brain and her heart have helped her overcome that.

I'll go down swinging every day of the week with a Jordyn Oliver. So not only has she helped lay the foundation of our program, but she's left a legacy inside of the people that are here.

Q. Leilani Kapinus gave you huge minutes today both offensively and defensively and with a game-tying shot. Could you speak to her impact in this game and throughout the season.

SHEA RALPH: Leilani is a kid I wish we could have for another three years, but I am grateful that we had her for one year. The one thing that I love about her is she shows up every day for a battle. I think that having her on our team -- the way that she plays out there, she plays that way every day in practice, similar to Mikayla, that's elevated the level of competitiveness.

She's also is a 100 percent believer. She comes in the game, and today she did, we were down 20, but she's done it several times in practice and in games, where she comes in and she lifts the level of energy and belief.

That's hard to like -- does it show up on here? It doesn't. She did a lot of other things that do, but that's just because of who she is. For those of you that don't get to sit in a locker room and do what I do, you can't coach that. You can't coach a kid to have that level of belief when everything has gone wrong.

I know that there are points in the year when she was really disappointed with her production, that she wanted to be more of a piece, but she always found a way to impact our team in a positive way to help us win, to help us today to get in position to win the game.

So when you look at that, again, similar to J.O., you don't have the team that we had this year without a Leilani Kapinus, and I would have loved to coach her for a little bit longer so that I could see her reach her full potential.

But I'm hopeful that the lessons and the things and the -- I'm hopeful that what she learned here will make her the player that she always wanted to be when she goes and

plays pro, the things that she learned here.

Q. How much do you think foul trouble plays into the outcome of this game? Khamil, she played nine minutes in your first half, and then when you finally got her worked back into the game and things were really going your way with both her and Mikayla, then Mikayla got hit with, I believe, her fourth foul. She was able to stay in the game, but how much do you think the outcome of this game changes if both of them are able to kind of stay in the game and create the production they have all season?

SHEA RALPH: I'd like to think the outcome would be different, but I also know enough to know that I can't think that way. What we have to do is look back at what are the things we can control? Because, again, we've been in foul trouble before. How could we have been more prepared in that way, if I'm looking at myself, so that we could have a little bit better outcome in the overtime?

And then let go of blaming or pointing fingers. I'm just not that kind of person. So I would like to think, if we had our best players on the floor for most of the game, that the outcome would have been different, but that usually doesn't happen. In March, you have to prepare and expect everything. Prepare for the worst, hope for the best kind of thing.

I hated that for our players because in March I think players should decide games. I don't have a lot of control over it. I haven't all year. I'm not a coach that's going to spend half the game pitching at the referees either.

To me, we just have to be better so that that doesn't happen. In the future, I think our younger players will grow from this.

Q. A whole picture looking at this season from November to March, just kind of what made it special, especially having someone like Mikayla Blakes, a freshman, this whole year, but to you what has it meant as a coach?

SHEA RALPH: I think what's made it special is the growth that we've had. I know that, when I sit back and I'm asking the players to do something that I'm not capable of doing right now, right? I'm still thinking about it sucks that we lost the game. We should be playing on Sunday, and we're not. Why is that?

So I'll be thinking about that, but I will give myself time when I step away to recognize the growth that the program has had, the investment of the administration, and the chancellor and the entire Vanderbilt community.

I mean, look at everything that our athletic department is doing right now. How cool is it to be part of that? I get to be part of that. I think we're a big piece of why Vanderbilt athletics is moving in the right direction. I think we're great representatives of the university and of the standards that the university has for all students.

I want to keep moving in the right direction. I just hate losing. I hate it. So I have to remember in those moments when I feel that to practice what I preach with the players. I have to remember that my steps are ordered as are theirs. I know they're here for the right reason. I know I'm here for the right reason, and together we'll keep this moving in the right direction. We'll be a force to be reckoned with from here on out.

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