

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Baylor vs Duke

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Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Duke Blue Devils

Ashlon Jackson

Delaney Thomas

Kara Lawson

Media Conference

Q. Kind of just broad, general question but obviously this team has taken quite a turn for the better since a few months ago. Just what in general do you think has sparked you guys? Is there something specific that you can point to?

DELANEY THOMAS: I think we obviously had a rough start to the continue but I think it just took us being sick of kind of losing and struggling as a team and wanting to play better for each other, and with one another. We were kind of disconnected in that. I think that was just a commitment from the inside and coaching staff trying to make that turn.

ASHLON JACKSON: Pretty much the same answer. No one likes to lose and obviously the start of the season was pretty rough for us. But we knew that it wouldn't last the whole season unless we did something about it. And that just went on every single day. Like we didn't want that same feeling. So we had to get outside ourselves and just work that much harder because we knew it wasn't going to be given to us.

Yeah, that's pretty much our mindset.

Q. Did Kara's message stay consistent through that?

ASHLON JACKSON: For sure. She never gave up on us. She never will. She knew that we would see the outside of that Storm but it was up to us to just pull through and change our ways and just buy into what she was saying and really just our work ethic, really, and being there and playing for one another instead of just playing for ourselves.



Q. In that first time you guys met Baylor over in Paris, Riley was not yet in the starting lineup and she has since risen to that role and helped you accomplish all you've accomplished this season. What has she brought to the floor in terms of offense, defense? How has she made you guys better?

ASHLON JACKSON: First off, look at her build. Look at her size. She's a bigger guard. So offensively and defensively, that's a good thing to have on your team for sure and just her mentality to be able to attack the game and accept the challenge. She's shown up for us in big games and big-time plays, made big-time plays for us.

I feel like, overall, her mindset and her ability to come with it every single game has really, really helped us and also helped herself. Riley is a competitor, true competitor and so just being able to do that for us night-in and night-out has been a blessing for us for sure.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I think Riley is very versatile, and that helps us for sure. But I think also her tenacity and ability to bounce back, she has a rough game, she's able to bounce back the next one. She has a tough practice, she's able to bounce back. I think that's been good for our team, her steady and consistent presence.

Q. You scored nine points in that first meeting against Baylor, but you went 1-or-9 from the three. Anything they were doing defensively to shut you down or was it an off day?

ASHLON JACKSON: I just feel like that's how the game goes sometimes. You shoot the ball well; you shoot the ball crazy. Yeah, I just really think that's what it was.

Obviously that wasn't our best version of basketball. In November, it's nobody's best version of basketball, really. So just, yeah, my mindset is not really on that now. It's just focusing on what I can do to help impact my team.

Q. Can you speak to your mindset and the way that you go about trying to impact the game in a variety of ways to help your team win?

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I just try to do things that nobody wants to do: The rebounding, dirty plays, charges, whatever it takes. I just want to be there for my team and whatever the game presents, I just want to be there for my team.

Q. Does it feel like you guys are playing the same team again in Baylor or has it been so long that it's a fresh start for you guys?

DELANEY THOMAS: I think the tournament and March Madness, it brings a different type much mindset and competitive spirit. I think it's going to be a different game regardless. Both of us are different teams and just embracing that. It's tournament time. So the pressure and excitement of that will all bring new challenges.

ASHLON JACKSON: Same for me. Like nobody is the same from whenever they first started playing in November. They are better than they were. We are better than we were.

So, yeah, I just think the pressure itself of being in the tournament and being able to play for something and move on to the next weekend, that's what makes, like, it all so joyful and so competitive, as well. It just adds another layer of that.

But yeah, that's a great team. But we're a better -- well, we're not better but I'm saying we're a better team than November.

Q. Tomorrow is going to be your last game in Cameron. Can you speak to what it's meant to wear the Duke uniform and play four years in this building?

ASHLON JACKSON: Oh, my goodness. I've been so emotional this year just because of that. Just being able to play with someone like her.

Honestly it came so quick. Freshman year, I was just trying to keep up with the pace. Now I'm here, you know. So yeah, it's very bittersweet to do it in front of our home crowd and to do it also with best teammates in the world.

Hopefully I don't get so emotional tomorrow about it but yeah, it's just been a great ride and a great journey, and there's no other team, no other place I'd rather be to do it.

Q. I was just wondering, somebody who is probably going to get drafted in a few weeks if you've paid attention at all to what's going on with the CBA and the WNBA and if you had any thoughts on that?

ASHLON JACKSON: We are moving in the right direction.

I say that because we are, if you look at the numbers from previous to now, and just being able to go into something that's steady, you know, getting better, and our future is brightening more and more every single day. It's a good thing and I'm very, very excited about it moving forward.

KARA LAWSON: Well, I guess we're just happy to still be playing and obviously we have a tough opponent, familiar opponent, but not from the first game of the year, I guess, so not too familiar.

I'm sure we're both a lot different now, and obviously an experienced team. I mean, that jumped out to me about them when we played them. You know, just experienced, the amount of seniors that they have and the amount of big games that they have played in.

So we'll have to be ready to play one of our best games on both ends to be able to be in the game with a chance to win it.

Q. Yesterday, Mair seventh all-time in career assists in ACC history. I think she passed Miles and Amoore yesterday. As somebody who played the position, can you speak to what that means, seventh all time in ACC career assists?

KARA LAWSON: It's really one of the more underrated careers in ACC history when you think about it. You know, you look at the other names on the list and you look at the accolades and the publicity of those players, and you look at -- with Mair, and Mair's kind of height pales in comparison to the other names on that list. She's had an incredible career in our league.

What did you say, seventh? Seventh all time? I think it just speaks to her consistency, her play-making ability. We talk about it all the time. She's such a winner. She has got three conference championships, an ACC Tournament MVP, a Sweet 16 and an Elite 8. It's hard to find a player with the consistency that she's shown, started four years in the league. Just a great, great player.

Q. You spoke about the first matchup, months ago. How much have you taken from that in terms of game planning and whatnot?

KARA LAWSON: I take some from it for sure. Even though we're both different, and I can speak to our differences probably more than theirs but I'm going to assume they are a lot different, too.

You can still take some things from the game. But then you also have to look at more recent games and see how they are playing, what they are attacking, what they are

trying to exploit.

And you know, we have different personnel now than we did in that game. I think that's probably one of the biggest changes for us is we have different players playing different roles than the first game of the year.

Q. Talking to the players about the team's growth, they said your message stayed the same. Do you remember that as such or was that kind of by design? How did you treat that as it evolved?

KARA LAWSON: Do I remember the way they tell it the same, is that what you're asking?

Q. Your standpoint, your message to the team.

KARA LAWSON: When we were struggling?

Q. Yes.

KARA LAWSON: I like -- I like -- well, I don't say I like to think. I think I stay pretty consistent with my messaging throughout, whether we're playing well or we're not playing well in terms of the things that we need to do to be successful because those things don't change. Like the things you need to do to be successful, they don't change. It's really your commitment to doing them, and then your ability to do them that changes.

So if we're having high levels of success, the things that we need to do, we're doing. And if we're falling short, it's probably because we're not doing some of the things we're supposed to be doing. So trying to remind them in moments where we're not adhering to what we're supposed to be doing, hey, we've got to do these things.

And in a lot of cases it's also not just pointing them out but it's also helping them develop to be better in those areas, right. Like it's super easy to point out what people don't do well. It actually doesn't take a lot of skill. People think it does, to say, hey, this person stinks at this; this player stinks at that; this coach stinks at this; this team stinks at that. It's actually really easy to see that. It's really easy to see what we're not good at. Doesn't take skill to point it out.

What takes skills is to, like, fix it, right. Same thing with people. Like I can point out the flaws of everybody that I interact with. It's pretty easy, don't you think? Like, you meet somebody, and you're like, man, they are not very good at this. That's easy, isn't it?

You drive to work, you can tell who the bad drivers are right away. You don't even have to see their face. Just,

like, man, this car is a struggle.

So I think you can see that stuff very early. You can recognize that. But my job as a coach isn't to point it out. My job as a coach is to point it out and help them fix it, not fix it for them. Help them fix it.

So in that moment, that's what it was. It was assessing where we need to develop, and then telling them, Hey, here is where we need to be better and then working with them to get better in those areas, instead of just ranting and raving about what we stink at. That's not coaching. That's commentating. I did that 16 years.

Q. This is Riley's first tournament experience. Talk about what she's had to do to have a short memory from the Charleston game and how you're helping her fix it, would you say?

KARA LAWSON: She was bad yesterday. Similar. You know, we just talked about the areas that she needed to play better and reminds her what we need from her. What do we need from her? Consistency. We need great aggressiveness. We need her to impact the game, scoring, rebounding, defending, all the things that she's done all year long for us.

So that's going to happen, right. Like you're going to have players play bad games every game. You know, it doesn't surprise me as a coach that every player on my team doesn't play great when the game starts, you know. Some of them are going to struggle with some things. Some of them work through it within game and they can get it, and sometimes it stretches longer.

But we need her to play well. She knows that, and she's been really consistent all year. So I'm not freaking out about it. I think she's going to play well tomorrow for us. She just didn't play well yesterday. Got into a little foul trouble, too. I think that contributed.

Q. It's been a busy month for you, ACC tournament, Puerto Rico and now NCAA is here. How did you find it to switch gears on the focus, was it easy or difficult or was it all just basketball? And I'm sure you really enjoyed it.

KARA LAWSON: It wasn't difficult in Puerto Rico because hurry team was off. I don't know how every school does it. We typically give our team, after the conference tournament, because there's two weeks between the conference tournament and the NCAA Tournament, we typically give our team that first week off. Maybe not seven days but like a big chunk of time. And so our players also had spring break, academic spring break during that time.

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So they got to get away.

And that's true of players and staff. Everybody kind of gets that time off. So I just worked during my time off, which is typical for me, anyway. If I hadn't gone there, I would have been doing something working.

It was great. It was great to just be around the players again. It was great to have some experience coaching them in a game. Because the last camp we had was just practices, and I hadn't been with them in game action. And I hadn't been with any of them -- I had been with a lot of them in game action but in a different role as an assistant coach or three-on-three coach. It was nice have to reps on that.

Then I came back, obviously to not miss any preparation for during Duke. And so then I just watched the games. I made my schedule each day so that I was free during the times that they played. So, yeah, it was good.

Q. You talked about T's "Taina Mair" role, but when you look at her and Ash just as people, what impact have they had on this program the last several years?

KARA LAWSON: The most impact of any class that I've had here, you know, and this is my sixth year. They are in first place for sure. Overall impacts not just on the court, off the court. How consistent and solid they are as people, how committed they are to the team, and how much they love this program.

I mean, even sometimes you bring recruits on campus, and the seniors are not going to play with them. And I think what really shows you a lot about a program is like how much the seniors interact with recruits because they don't have -- they don't have skin in the game, in a sense, like they are not going to play with them.

So like they don't need them, per se, whereas when you're an underclassman, you want as many top recruits as possible because that's going to help make your team that you play in a better team. And you would think that they were sophomores when players come on campus of how, like, bought in they are and how invested they are and everybody's success in our program.

They gave me -- this is the first time this ever happened. They gave me a gift on their senior night. That's never happened to me before. Usually like on the senior night, you give the players the gifts and for the first time ever in my career, the seniors on senior night gave me a gift. I think that speaks to the relationship, for sure, but I think it speaks more to the type of people that they are.

Q. You mentioned some of the personnel differences from that first game. What other differences do you feel in your team from that first meeting with Baylor in Paris, and are you more confident going into this one because of the way you ended the season?

KARA LAWSON: I think we are more connected just by virtue of the time spent, you know, together and playing. That's what the season does for you, if you use the season right, is the reps that you get in good games and bad games, and wins and losses kind of fortify the bond that you have. I definitely think we are more fortified than we were to start the year.

Obviously we have some young players that play. We start two sophomores. We bring a freshman off the bench, and so I think their growth and their maturation, I think they are different players than they were to start.

You know, our freshman, Arianna, is a different player than she was to start the year.

Riley is a sophomore but she hadn't played in that year because she red-shirted. Thinking back to her first game, she was nervous out of her mind. She hadn't played in one so long, and now she's played in a ton of them. So now she's got a little more confidence to her. I think the mature of our young players is a little bit different and then our connectivity as a team.

You know, confidence, I think we always have a good mix of confidence and of respect, and I think it's important to have that balance when you go into a matchup. I do think you have to be confident in who you are and what you can do.

But I think you have to have a healthy respect for who the opponent is and what they can do. So we talk about that a lot. We try to stay firmly rooted in both of those as we approach a matchup. I think any team approaching a matchup should believe they can win. We believe that. And they should, too. I'm sure they do. They already beat us. So I'm sure they believe they can win, right.

Then you have to have that respect of, Hey, if we don't do these things, we will lose. You know, they are certainly good enough to beat us. They have already proven that, and so we have to play a really good game to be in the game tomorrow.

And so that's our goal. You know, our goal is to play as well as we can, and see where that takes us.

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