

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - San Diego State vs LSU

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

San Diego State Aztecs
Coach Stacie Terry-Hutson
Kim Villalobos
Veronica Sheffey

Nat Martinez

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Welcome back to Baton Rouge. Joining us is Kim Villalobos, Veronica Sheffey and Nat Martinez.

Ladies, congratulations on the season. Welcome to the NCAA Tournament.

Kim, let me start by asking you to give us an overview of the path to get here. You're riding an eight-game win streak that ties the longest of the season for you. First time in a while making the tournament. Tell us about the season and the road that you took to get here.

KIM VILLALOBOS: It's been a great season from the beginning to the end. Being where we are now, I think we're just so proud of how we played this whole year. We really tapped into that we over me. Even just the past three seasons have been great seasons for us. Just super proud of the team and the program so far. We absolutely deserve to be here so we're super excited.

THE MODERATOR: It's great to have you here.

Veronica, that tournament was something else to face the number one and the number two seed. You had yourself quite a tournament. Congratulations on your individual honor.

Share with us the experience of the tournament, and especially the drama of the triple overtime to get that win to get here.



VERONICA SHEFFEY: It was super fun. We've been preparing all season for that moment, for that tournament. So we were all locked in. Right when we got this, just knowing what we had to do to come out with three wins for that tournament. So it was super exciting. The three overtime game to finish it off was crazy.

Just being in that situation, playing that many minutes, you know, to finish off the game that we needed to win. I feel like it really tested what we could do as a team, tested what we've been working on for the whole season and we were able to get it done. Just super proud of this team. It's been a tremendous experience so far.

THE MODERATOR: Nat, can you share with us, what the ride has been like for you as a freshman, three time Freshman of the Week in the conference. You're certainly no stranger to scoring, averaging 30 points a game as a senior in high school. But what's it been like for you to be on this journey as a freshman and get to the NCAA Tournament?

NAT MARTINEZ: It's been super exciting. I mean, from the beginning, our coaches, and even the older girls, have really installed the we over me mentality. So just playing as a team instead of individually has really helped us get to where we're at today.

THE MODERATOR: Again, congratulations.

We'll open questions to those who are here. We'll start on a Zoom call.

Q. I have a question for Kim to start with. What is the coincidence that Stacie's first game as an NCAA head coach is back where she was an assistant? How does that coincidence strike you.

KIM VILLALOBOS: I think it's crazy that, like you said, it's a coincidence. I just know she had a great time here. It's a cool experience overall. I know she had a great time here and it was a long time ago and we're back here. For a lot of us, it's our first time in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It's a fun fact, I think.

THE MODERATOR: Has she shared a lot of that experience with you all, from when the team was last here and she was on the LSU staff?

KIM VILLALOBOS: A little bit. She just said she was on the other side of it. I don't know a lot. I think it was a long time ago, but, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: 2012, to be exact.

Any questions here in person while we're chatting or we'll continue chatting here?

Q. For any player that feel comfortable with this one, you have two of the top players for LSU trying to come back from injuries. One missed the SEC tournament entirely and one got hurt during it. So what are your kind of expectations of facing an LSU team in that situation? Do you just prepare for them like you've seen them at their best or do you have to test them in a certain way, maybe try to test their conditioning, things like that?

VERONICA SHEFFEY: I think we know the type of team we're playing. We respect them as a team, but I think we prepare for every one the same way, regardless of what injuries have happened to certain players, but we're going to have the same mentality when it comes to that. We've been doing what we can on our side to prepare.

We respect them as a team, but it doesn't change the way we approach the game and how we're going to play.

Q. So ya'll ended the season 8-0, just the way you started the season. What does that mean for your momentum and your confidence to take that across the country to play LSU tomorrow?

NAT MARTINEZ: We're excited the way we started the way we're ending. We're just going to play our game. 8-0 doesn't really matter to us. Yes it brings momentum, but as Ronnie said, we're going to prepare the same way for any team we do play. So I feel we're more excited than anything.

Q. How do you guys embrace the underdog role in this situation?

KIM VILLALOBOS: I think it's a great opportunity. You have nothing to lose. You're looking to compete to the best of your ability. You're just out there having fun, playing basketball, what we love to do. And being the underdog in this case is, I think it's a great opportunity. I'd rather be the underdog, honestly, in everything.

THE MODERATOR: Back to one of our Zoom guests.

Q. Kim, this is for you, actually. It's kind of a two part question. I wanted to ask how old you were when you first picked up a basketball and then what your younger self would think of you now as you enter this stage right now in this tournament?

KIM VILLALOBOS: I think I was maybe, like, five. My older brothers played so I was at every single game trying to shoot and stuff. So I think I was like five.

What was the second part of your question, sorry?

Q. What would your five year old self think of you now at this stage?

KIM VILLALOBOS: I would be so proud of myself. I think going to college for free was already the mountaintop. Graduating with a degree and then being able to have the opportunity to get a Master's degree, all of those little things is, I think I'm just super proud of. I think I'd be proud of myself and happy that I'm playing ball.

THE MODERATOR: You should be. Along those lines, we should mention that you played for the El Salvadorian national team and you were named Top Salvadorian Player of the United States. That's quite an honor.

How does the international experience help you?

KIM VILLALOBOS: It helps me a lot. It's super physical over there. I'm playing grown women, you know, 30 years old, 28 years old women, playing Brazil, all those top teams in the country, in other countries, I mean. So great experience. I love it every summer.

Q. For Kim, I want to ask you just when you came into the program to now, how have you seen the growth of this team, the growth of the program and where do you think it is today compared to when you joined?

KIM VILLALOBOS: I have seen so much growth. I never put a ceiling on the program. This is why it's my fifth year here. I've always respected the staff and what they wanted to do and I've always saw the same vision they saw. Always had all the confidence in the world in every single one of my teammates that was on the court all of those years.

Kind of what me and Meghan were saying the other day, you want to leave a place better than when you found it. I think that's what we've done here and that's what I really try to do. I don't think it was just me. I think it was every single person along for that ride. I'm just super happy and,

yeah, just happy.

THE MODERATOR: Veronica, the other two teams in this regional, for them it's playing on a neutral court. You happen to get the host team. It's going to be loud, a different level. It's a whole new season. The most important thing for your team going into that game tomorrow night when you see it's a late tip for Baton Rouge time, the house is going to be full, you know you're playing against the home team. What's the most important thing for your team to get off to a good start against LSU?

VERONICA SHEFFEY: Just being focused and staying locked into our game plan I think is the most important. We're expecting it to be loud and packed and we've been preparing for that. I think it's just exciting. I think our whole team is looking forward to the opportunity to play in that kind of environment.

This is what we work for. Like I said in the beginning, this is what we worked for all season. I think, you know, we would want to play on the host team's court. I think it's a great challenge for us. We're excited.

THE MODERATOR: Nat, totally agree?

NAT MARTINEZ: Yeah. We're totally excited. Coming in as a freshman, too, what more do you want than to play first round at March Madness at someone else's house?

Q. Nat, you just mentioned being a freshman and being in the tournament your first year. Is there anything special to you about going to this tournament specifically and being able to bring the tournament to -- SDSU to the tournament for the first time in 13 years as a freshman?

NAT MARTINEZ: Yeah. Like I said before, the vets have really been installing into us, you know, we're capable of doing anything that we want to do. So just playing the way that we play and, you know, we call us freshman, a little inside joke, The Fab Four. Whenever we're on the court with the older girls, The Babysitting Squad. We're just excited and happy to be here. We all are.

Q. For anyone who wants to jump in on this, you all are taking your talents to the national stage. What is one thing the country doesn't know about this team?

VERONICA SHEFFEY: We're a group full of competitors. I think we've been a little bit underestimated throughout this season, a lot, and we're used to that, but we have the underdog mentality and I think, you know, we've shocked a lot of people with what we've done this season so far and we want to keep that going. We're a group of competitors

and we want to play together and we have a lot of fight in us.

THE MODERATOR: Wish you the best of luck, ladies.

We're joined by the head coach of San Diego State, Stacie Hutson.

Coach, it's great to have you back in Baton Rouge. It's good to see you. Why don't you share with us a little bit the journey of your team, making its first appearance in a dozen plus years in the NCAA Tournament? Talk about the road to get here.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: It's been tough and challenging. I love our group. They've been very resilient. A very deep team. We've relied on our depth. The Mountain West is a really tough league that sometimes I think doesn't get a lot of respect. We have some great teams in the league. So we're happy to come out of Mountain West and represent them in the NCAA Tournament.

Ironically, the last time that San Diego State was in the NCAA Tournament, I was on the other side coaching here. They came in and played us pretty tough. They missed a lot of free throws. We were getting worried, but we were able to pull it out. It's a crazy story line being able to come back. I have a lot of family here. It's very familiar. And not so much. There's been a lot of changes in the last 12 years. Excited to be back.

THE MODERATOR: The players were asked what they thought about that story line. They said it was unique and neat. I was asking them, how much have you shared with them about being on the other side, these two teams matching up and what it means to play here in this tournament?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Just a little bit. I'm excited for them. We made it more about them than me and our journey.

You know, just excited because a lot of these young women have not played in the NCAA. This is a first time experience for them and just watching the joy on their faces when they were cutting down nets and our name being called to play in the tournament, it's been much more about them than me.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. I want you to reflect a little bit more, though, on the coincidence, you personally, of your first NCAA Tournament back where you were an assistant coach.



What does it mean to you personally that it's happening here?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Like I said, I was talking to my staff. I'm a little torn because I have a lot of love for LSU. I've been really proud to watch what Coach Mulkey has done with this program. I thought we did a good job while we were here. To win a national championship is really cool, and to see this place packed night in and night out.

On the flip side, I'm excited to play in that environment. They have a great following and crowd. This is a great experience for us.

But to answer the question, it's a great story, but really it's been these young women that are playing tomorrow night. You know, it's a late game.

You said 30 minutes after. I hope me don't go later than 9:15.

The star power that's going to be against us. We're a little bit of the underdog and that's kind of the chip we're taking into this.

THE MODERATOR: The staff tells me, you do remember the good restaurant recommendations. You might be making it about the team, but you do have the good restaurant insights.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: We know where to eat. There's a lot of great places to eat.

Q. Did you mention what the environment is like in here during the tournament to your team in terms of preparing them for this game?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Absolutely. We've done our best. We haven't played in that type of environment, but we're excited to. We've had crowd noise, loud music in the gym. We have all hand signals now so they can make sure or we can make sure we can communicate with them. We know it's deafening. When they go on a run, it's really hard to hear. We're going to do our best to make sure we're always communicating. That's one of the keys to make sure we're staying on the same page.

Q. Some of the unknowns or yet to be seen with Johnson an Morrow in terms of rustiness or fitness, does that affect how you approach those match-ups in any particular way?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Not really because we're preparing for them to be full strength, but they're pretty deep, too. So they have a lot of different people that can

score the ball. We're preparing for them to be full strength. I anticipate that everyone will play, but we haven't trained or scouted any differently. We're ready, and we're just going to make sure we do our best and try to follow the game plan and stay connected. If we can stay connected in that environment, no matter who is on the floor, I think we give ourselves a good chance.

Q. How do you embrace the underdog role in this game? You've touched a little bit on it there.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Coming from Vegas winning the tournament, we're playing with house money at this point. The expectation, I think, ESPN gave us 1.2 percent chance of winning this game. I don't want them to fear it. I want them to embrace and meet the moment.

LSU is a fantastic team and we're excited to play them. There's going to be two teams battling it out on Saturday night and we're going to give it everything we got.

Q. You have gone to the tournament a few times. No matter if it was at LSU or elsewhere, what experience have you brought to your players and tell them about playing in a tournament as a whole, and this is the first time in 13 years you guys have had an opportunity to play for SDSU?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: I talked about being present in the moment, not fearful or intimidated. There is a lot of stuff that's going on, the pomp and circumstance around the tournament, which I want them to enjoy, but this is a business trip. We're here to play basketball, so just trying to find the balance of that. We had some of our young ladies that were on the team that came here 12 years ago to come talk to them and just, she gave great advice to be present in the moment and enjoy it because sometimes it's a once in a lifetime opportunity and we want to make the best of it.

Q. Does it mean anything special to you as a San Diego native to bring your team to the tournament after all these years as a coach and also as a native to the City of San Diego?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: I'm very proud of being a San Diegan. A lot of us are transplants. My mother and father were both in the military so I'm a Navy baby. We have to two young ladies on our team that are also from San Diego. We're just representing our city. We've had some great success with UCSD, both men and women going to the tournament so that's fun.

We're proud of our city and San Diego is really stepping up as of late.



Q. I'm curious, not trying to go into more minute details, but can you walk through the process of I guess teaching the team hand signals? How do you implement how to prepare for a loud environment and what goes into that?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: At this point, we've done a lot of coaching in the preparation. At this point, it's on them to realize, okay, we're in this situation, this is what we need to do. We try to put them in those situations already so they'll be prepared for it. But this is, like you are alluding to, this is a very unique situation. We'll be able to communicate with hand signals. We've had a little bit of time to practice since it's a late game on Saturday. I think we'll be prepared and no matter what we do, the ball dictates. If they can stay locked in to the scouting report and what we're trying to do, I think they'll have a better chance to stay connected this those moments.

Again, when LSU goes on runs, it's deafening. I'll use my timeouts as best I can to make sure, but we're also planning to make a couple of runs ourself.

Q. I want you to reflect on how far this team has come, the program, with Kim Villalobos, her career will be ending here maybe a month from now, who knows. It's going to end and she's been an important part to you personally. If you could just quickly reflect on what she's meant to you and the program.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Well, before I get onto Kim, thank you for the question. In my phone, if you were to go into my chat thread, it says '24-' 25 Mountain West Champions. We came into this season preparing to win. There was some ups and downs throughout the season, but overall, I thought we played a really good year of basketball. We've had really impactful freshman come in and make a difference. We've had very impactful transfers come in. And he's alluding to Kim Villalobos, and we have a couple others who have stayed to fight another day with us.

Kim has been with me for five years, played all five years through her COVID year with us and just has really been able to literally say she came out a champion. We have a great mix of young women that bonded and collectively decided that they were willing to win and willing to sacrifice to win and that's really what our we over me slogan all year has been. We all have wristbands and we wear them all the time understanding that if we could sacrifice our individual game for the team goals that greater things are ahead of us.

THE MODERATOR: I'd like to follow up with something if

you don't mind because you're talking about the players sticking together. You're one of 21 programs which did not lose a player to the transfer portal, which seems impossible these days.

Do you need to get that?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: My apologies. That should be on silent.

THE MODERATOR: I wanted to ask you what that means to you and the program you're building that everybody is back.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: I think it's a testament to the people not only our organization, our administration and the people around us. You come to San Diego, you are going to get a quality education, live 15 minutes from the beach and you're competing for championships. I can't think of too many better places to live.

Q. The Aztecs are playing on a national stage. What is one thing the country doesn't know about this team, you think?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: That's a great question. I'm going to say that we are a very good basketball team that a lot of people don't know about. We can hit you from a lot of different ways offensively. We share the ball. We're 20-2 when we have three or four people in double digits. So we're going to take quality shots and really try to use the shot clock to get something that away need, and this year we're a really good defensive team.

We're going to try to take that and throw everything at LSU and see what we got.

Q. Playing LSU the last three years is not just facing great players but celebrities. The coach, Flau'Jae Johnson. Some of your players probably listen to Flau'Jae Johnson. Coaches don't like distractions, not that they'd go ask for an autograph or anything, but they could be distracted.

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: It's funny, I was watching the games and I see her Powerade commercial, Flau'Jae every commercial.

But you know what, I get excited for her. I get excited for women's basketball. I've been in it a long time. This is my 26th season. I have a 12 year old in the grassroots part of growing her game. I'm just excited that women are getting the exposure that they're getting. I don't think there's anything wrong with it, I get excited when I see that stuff for all the young women that are getting the dues. We all work

so very hard. Our young women are practicing multiple hours a day then they're going to school, now they have NIL responsibilities and everything going on. I think it's a great thing when I see them in the commercials.

Yes, I'm excited for the star power, but just really excited to see where our game has gone. It's changed so much in the last ten years. I'm just excited for it to continue to grow.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you had some players from that tournament team that came back to San Diego State to talk to ya'll. Who were those players and what was the biggest message they said to you and your team?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: Courtney Clements came back and the biggest message was to stay present and enjoy the moment. She remembers having the opportunities, to make sure they cherish the moment because it's not easy to get to this point. Not a lot of people are playing post season, and for us to have an opportunity to come to LSU and play on their home court and play against the star power that's on the other side is just a really exciting and great opportunity. So she was just making sure that we stayed in the moment and to lean into each other, stay together and just have fun.

THE MODERATOR: I feel like I should ask you about the ride you're on, eight game win streak, which is the longest of the season. Your last loss was by 10 to UNLV who was the number one seed. You beat them by 12, then you win in three overtimes. What have they learned about themselves and what did you learn about themselves of making the run to earn the title to get to come here?

STACIE TERRY-HUTSON: We have a great setup. Our pre-season set us up for the tournament. We went to Cancun and played really tough team, Power Four opponents. So we were preparing for that moment. But I think what I learned from my team, maybe she just reminded me is we have an undeniable will to win. We're going to lock in and pay attention to the game plan and play for each other. The staff will have them prepared and that's what I've learned, that if when we lock in, we can be really, really good. We fear nobody but respect everybody. So we're going to step up to this challenge and see what we can do.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, and best of luck.

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