

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - George Mason vs Florida State

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

George Mason Patriots

Coach Vanessa Blair-Lewis

Nalani Kaysia

Paula Suarez

Media Conference



PAULA SUAREZ: Yeah, and stamp and help the new people that are going to come in.

NALANI KAYSIA: Yeah, echoing what P said, just knowing people coming in the future know that Mason is a winning program. There is a culture that comes along with that, and just leaving our mark and knowing this is the steppingstone. What we did was history, but it's only up from here.

Q. Paula, you're the first Mason player to spend all four years of her career at Mason with Coach Blair-Lewis. What have the last four years meant to you, and when you look back on your career, what does that mean to you?

PAULA SUAREZ: I'm just really happy, really proud of the program, the team, myself, how much I've grown like on the court and off the court thanks to coaches.

So I'm just really happy looking back and seeing where the program is.

Q. Could you putt into words what this experience has been like just being at the NCAA tournament for Nalani having Zayla (ph) with you and just this whole ride throughout the last couple weeks here?

PAULA SUAREZ: Just really exciting because we didn't know what it was like. You always see it from the outside, see the games and everything. It's not the same watching the games and when you're here. Okay, we're going to play there and be there, so it's just really exciting.

NALANI KAYSIA: Yeah, being a part of it all just excitement. You know, TikTok and social media is a big thing, so seeing all the, this is what you get for March Madness, this is what you get to do X, Y, X. Being a part of that is like, wow, we really made it.

Q. And then we saw you all come back and kind of loop around and show the fans and Green Machine your love. Something you do at pretty much every home game, if not every home game. What has their

Florida State 94, George Mason 59

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I'm so proud of these ladies for the incredible season that they've had. And not just this season. You know, they say if you want a bigger house you have to have a bigger deposit. And each year we did that. We put a bigger deposit down to the season that we wanted.

This year, no matter the outcome of this game, does not define who they are as a whole. They are champions. They have put a legacy in place at Mason. They've won an A-10 Championship and had the first-ever NCAA berth at the university. That can never be taken away.

I thanked them in the locker room for the deposit they made in this program, and I'm super proud of not just the basketball players they have become, but the human beings and the leaders they're going go out into the world to become.

Q. For either of you, you guys have helped set a new standard for this program. What has it meant to you personally?

PAULA SUAREZ: It means a lot knowing that the people are going to stay here next year. Freshmen are coming into a culture that's really competitive, and every single year they're going to be up there competing for a championship and win to and come into NCAA. So it just means a lot that we can like put our little -- what is it calked? Like a little...

NALANI KAYSIA: Stamp.



love and support meant to you throughout the postseason run and looking back over your career as well?

PAULA SUAREZ: It means a lot. They're there obviously every single home game cheering us on and also when we go on the road a flight is really far and they still come here, still excited and cheer for us. So they mean a lot.

NALANI KAYSIA: Yeah, the support, overwhelming support from the Mason community, the Fairfax community means a lot. There will be times you walk around campus and they'll be like, we're so excited to see you play, or, we just love watching you all play. It really brightens your day.

Days that you know practice might be long, seeing them will brighten your day because they'll just be so excited to see you.

Q. For Paula, what was kind of your goal against Florida State? Obviously had a really strong game. At what point -- through three quarters you probably believed you were still manage this game. Do you have a sense of what happened, where the score got away from you?

PAULA SUAREZ: Coming in we just want to win, compete. We are here for a reason. We know we can beat them. Then I think they just -- I don't know if it's like maybe the physicality or the athleticism and they just started making a lot of shots and we weren't playing our best offense.

So I don't think we hang or heads down. We competed. We just kind of like relaxed in the fourth quarter.

Q. Paula, career high for you. What does that mean to you? And for Nalani, talk about watching Paula get a career high and finish her career individually on a high note.

PAULA SUAREZ: Just wanted to win. Just wanted to competed. I was just trying to be aggressive, take the shots that I could to help the team. So, yeah.

NALANI KAYSIA: No one is more deserving than P. She works so hard and she's an amazing teammate and puts everyone before herself. So seeing her put herself first and it shows and her putting on the national stage once again that she's a Spanish cook book, so I'm extremely happy for her.

Q. Coach, could you put into words just what this means for the program, being on this stage and all the attention that comes with making the NAAs, all the

interviews and appearances you guys have done? What does that do for this program moving forward?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: You know, I think it definitely shouts loudly that this is a school that is a basketball program. You know, I always say administrations decide whether you're going to be champions long before they higher a coach. Our administration has done that. They have poured into this program. A-10 is a basketball centric conference. I think there is an amazing place to be.

Obviously the steps we've taken to get to that level in such a short period of time, literally from the bottom to the top, has been a long, arduous trip, but it's been so worth it. I think the thing that stands out the most is, like I said, not just the wins and losses. These women that we had the ability -- and being blessed to coach far extends beyond the wins and losses.

They are the next generation of leaders, and I'm really proud of the job we've done as a coaching staff to pour into them more than the Xs and Os.

Q. Similar to what I asked the players, Paula was the first player that you recruited to Mason that stayed all four years. Can you just talk about the journey that you have been on with her from the bottom and that 14th place finish to now watching her end her Mason career with a career high in the NCAA tournament?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I wish I could take credit that I recruited her. She showed up on an air plane with a bag and she said, I'm here. I didn't even know if the child spoke English.

But she was dedicated. You know, she came with a hard work ethic. We just said in the locker room, like she's the person you want to emulate. There was never one time she was late to study hall, late to a practice, did she complain. She was the most low maintenance player we've ever coached.

So much so sometimes you didn't even know if she was there. She was quiet but she was watching. She was not just a player to watch on the court but she became an amazing student.

She's a 4.0 student opportunity getting literally off of a plane, and for four years she kept getting on that plane and getting off that plane and coming back. It was tough. Like we had zero wins to start her career.

She been through the tough ups and downs of anyone on this team. Then this year they blossomed into a beautiful flower. She grew, found her voice, and she believed she

could shoot the ball.

Q. You talked about over the years how this program has been built and how when you started there was not a whole lot of fan and community buy-in with this program. What was it like walking out tonight seeing not just Green Machine and the cheer team but the fan support that was here tonight for you guys?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I think Fairfax has been waiting to have a champion. They've had it on the guys' side and in other sports and obviously the Final Four run was amazing, but the women's basketball team, we wanted to be their champion to cheer for.

Each year we made it important and vital to get out in the community and have them come in and see us play.

But I think women's basketball laid a lot of that groundwork. Just how the growth of the women's game, a lot of people game curious in town. What is this women's basketball all about. We gave them something to cheer for and we're proud of what we built. I'm so thankful they did not find it robbery to come watch us play this weekend.

Q. What did you think of your team's overall performance this season? What do you believe that -- what do you hope to improve on going into next season with the players coming in?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Yeah, I was really proud of this team going from rejection the year before. We had a tough time in our A-10 tournament last year. Really, really talented bunch of young women. We didn't get to finish that season the way that we wanted to.

So to come back this year there was a fire in their belly and a lot of things I didn't have to say for them to be ready and prepared. The losses we took this year were losses we needed to take to take the next step. I think those losses prepared us to go into the A-10 tournament this year and really become a team playing at its best and peaking at the right time.

I'm really excited about this journey, especially watching this team this year, from rejection to redemption.

Q. Ta'Niya Latson, and I know they had to have several players that play really well, to pull away from you guys, just with her being the leading scorer in the nation, what were your impressions of her influence on the game tonight? What kind of -- how do you find her temperament on the court and how did that translate to her results?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: She's exactly who they said she was: Leading scorer the nation. There were times during the game that you just enjoy watching really good basketball. She's a great player. Great player for our game. She's going to be a joy to watch for some years to come.

Q. Can't end the season press conference without asking this. How has this season embodied believing big?

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Oh, man, I told them today in the locker room, I said, you know, I was thinking about a story to tell them to get ready for this game. I thought about David and Goliath. I said, no, that's really not the story. I thought about Joshua and I was like, maybe that's not it.

Then I thought about George Foreman, great that we just lost, and how he championed the "I'm possible" instead of impossible. You know what? The story I want to tell is the story that you wrote. Your story. A story that will be for years to come told about these great women who believed in something when there was no evidence of it. That believed big enough to believe that they could be future champions.

That's the story. And you guys are the authorize. So you get to decide how long that's chapters go and when the chapter ends. Tonight I would like for you keep writing because I've enjoyed reading even single page of your journey.

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