

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Vanderbilt vs Columbia

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

Vanderbilt Commodores
Shea Ralph

Jordyn Cambridge

Sacha Washington

Iyana Moore

Media Conference



close to Nashville. You've grown up watching this program play in the NCAA tournament, win games in the NCAA tournament. How much does it mean to you being from middle Tennessee to help Vanderbilt get back into the NCAA tournament for the first time in a decade?

IVANA MOORE: It means a lot. It's the main reason I came to Vanderbilt, to help rebuild the program, and to see us going to the NCAA tournament with people that I love, it's like a really great feeling. I've never had to have nerves. I'm just really excited to be here.

Q. In an era of college basketball where movement between schools is the norm, the transfer portal is wide open, you three are really a testament to staying in a program, building a culture, and now being rewarded here in the NCAA tournament. What does that continuity for you all mean and to see this moment for your program that you've worked hard for?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Just knowing, the three of us, when we all got here, I know that we had a vision, we had a plan, and just sticking to that and seeing it come through is really just the best thing. Everyplace has its ups and downs, but just staying true to what the vision has planned, it's been awesome for us.

THE MODERATOR: Iyana.

IVANA MOORE: To piggyback off of what Sacha said, we knew what it was when we came into this program. We knew we wanted to be a part of a rebuilding program and just for us to be a part of something that's very special, coming back to the NCAA tournament after a couple years. It's just a really good feeling, especially with these people that I know. Like, we put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into it and it's really cool to come back and do it on a big stage.

MODERATOR: Jordyn.

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: Yeah, they really hit it on the head, but also to add to that, especially for me, Nashville is my city, it's my hometown, and Vanderbilt is just a great

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the student-athletes at this time.

Q. Jordyn, how much does getting to the NCAA tournament in your final year at Vanderbilt mean to you after everything you've gone through with missing two seasons with the injuries and being in college for six years, being the first six-year Commodore? How does it feel to end your story here in the NCAA tournament?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: It feels amazing. I have obviously been waiting for this moment for a very long time. I think it's amazing that I get to go out with a bang and do it with my teammates in my final year of basketball and I just can't wait to play tomorrow and keep playing on after that. It's really special. I'm really excited for it.

Q. Sacha, this is a familiar foe that you're going to have in the First Four game against Columbia. You played them in New York City. How much do you think that familiarity with them and that proximity of your last game is going to help you all prepare for this game?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Yeah, so we're just excited to play them. We know that we've match up with them well in the past and we're going to match up well with them again. We're excited and we've prepared and we've come ready, so I think it will be really good for us.

Q. Iyana, you're from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, really



university and when you think about -- when I think about my life beyond basketball, there's no better place I would rather be to set myself up to do things I want to do, accomplish the things I want to accomplish in life. So there's no reason to go anywhere else because you can't -- it doesn't get much better than the basketball, the city, and the university.

Q. Jordyn, I know you spoke briefly about coming here and building this program, but you can you talk about the emotions you all had and the entire team had Sunday and just to hear your name -- your team's name being called?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: First, it was amazing to even be able to have a watch party for something like this. Obviously it was my first time doing it. Honestly, my heart was racing the whole entire time sitting on the couch. I'm just like, okay, when is our name going to get called?

But it was exciting when they finally called our name. I just remember just being so ecstatic, jumping up and down, celebrating with my team. The fact that, again, I get to do this in my final year is amazing. I'm excited to be here with my teammates, I'm excited to be here with our coaches, and I'm excited to see how far we go.

Q. Iyana, I noticed when you guys came into the room that you were singing, looking pretty relaxed. Do you feel as relaxed as you look?

IYANA MOORE: Yeah, I mean, we worked really hard to get here. No one thought we could get here, so I feel like I'm real relaxed. We just got something to prove, and everybody in the room believes that we can do what we can do, so just go out there and do it.

Q. Which song were you singing?

IYANA MOORE: It's called Secrets.

Q. I'm curious what you think of Columbia and how you guys match up with them, considering they're a really guard-heavy team. What do you look forward to against playing these really good guards tomorrow?

IYANA MOORE: I think keeping the main thing the main thing and that's focusing on us, going out there prepared, having our game plan well executed, knowing personnel, keeping ourselves together. But just really focusing on ourselves, I think that's the biggest part, never really looking too deep into what they do. As long as we keep ourselves together, collected, focused, knowing personnel, knowing scout, we'll be good.

Q. Coach Ralph has a long championship pedigree coming here and building a program. What lessons has she imparted on you about getting to this moment and performing in an NCAA tournament setting?

SACHA WASHINGTON: There's so many. I feel like every day we learn something different. I think the biggest things are, if you want to be a competitor, you have to compete every single days, you have to show up every single day, you have to be the player that you want to be every single day, you have to be a good teammate, and you just have to show up for your team because at the end of the day, like, you can get yourself where you want to be, but only you can believe that and it only goes how far you believe it.

So I think that's just the biggest thing that I've learned. I know she's pushed me way out of my comfort zone and taught me so many things.

IYANA MOORE: The biggest thing, I think, she told us energy and effort really can go a long way. As long as we have those two things, win or losing, we never want to say, oh, they beat us. We want to say, we gave a hard fight, things like that.

So she's just really taught us that having energy and effort, playing hard, playing for each other will take us a long way.

Q. Jordyn, what's the best defensive advice you've ever gotten?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: That's a great question. Honestly, it's kind of one of those things where, to me, defense is a mindset. It's nothing that is physical. Obviously, knowing personnel helps a lot, but it's kind of like if you want to do it, you do it. It sounds like easier said than done, obviously, but for me, it just kind of happens like that. So I feel like my coaches just being, you know what you do, we know what you do, just go out there and do it is -- I know it sounds really simple, but that's just how it is for me. There's no strategy behind it. I go out there and say, I don't want you to score on me, and do everything to not allow you to score on me.

Q. You live it and it's been passed down to you as well?

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: That too. It's also in my bloodline.

Q. Coach Ralph on Sunday night talked about how this -- she talked to you guys about how this group is the one that laid the foundation for what's to come success-wise with the program. I'm curious how much

pride you guys take in that, of being kind of the cornerstones for the trajectory of this program possibly going upward.

JORDYN CAMBRIDGE: Obviously, there's a lot of pride in that and we obviously know where we came from. So obviously, I've been here the longest, so I know where I came from from the beginning to where I am now and then, obviously, when they came in two years or three years after I already been here. Anyway, obviously, we also know that we put in a lot of work to get here and we didn't wake up one day and like, oh, yeah, we're in the NCAA tournament for the first time in a decade and it just happened.

So obviously, there's a process and obviously it's very prideful to know that we helped Vanderbilt get to where it is today, but the process, I think, is what's most important to all of us because we can look back and say, wow, we started here but look at us now and look where we're going to continue to go.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. Good luck tomorrow night against Columbia.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll open up the floor to questions for coach, please.

Q. How excited are you to have your team here after a season where you were pre-season picked last, collect 22 wins, and have one of the best seasons here in a decade? Just how happy are you for you to lead Vanderbilt here to March Madness?

SHEA RALPH: We are obviously very excited to be here in this position. From the moment that we got this team together this was our goal, to compete in the post-season and the NCAA tournament. The goal of our program as we move forward is to compete for championships. So this is a great step in the right direction and really proud of my team because I think our body of work this year has been excellent. You can see individually and as group we're growing, we're improving, and we're ready for the moment.

Q. Before we began, we listed all of your accolades here in March in the NCAA tournament at UCONN. How will that experience help prepare the team as you get ready for this run in the NCAA tournament?

SHEA RALPH: I think when you look at preparing for the NCAA tournament when you've been there as many times as I've been blessed to be there as a player and a coach, one of the things you start to understand is that you have

to operate like a champion always. You don't get to the NCAA tournament and to March and then think that you're going to do championship things. You have to be a champion always.

So we're trying to teach our kids that operating like that is a day-to-day thing. Whether it's in the summer, in the spring, in the classroom, in the community, on the court, we want to be champions. So what we're doing here is nothing different than we've done all year. We prepare the same way, we scout the same way, we practice the same way, we treat our kids the same way. We are ready for this because we've been preparing for this since the summer and I want my players also to feel comfortable knowing that when you get to these moments, all the things that you have done have made you ready. We're not going to get ready here. We are ready. Now we're just fine-tuning and getting ready to play Columbia tomorrow.

Q. Speaking of Columbia, it is a very familiar foe with this program. The two teams played last season in New York City. Vanderbilt was able to come away with a victory in that. How much is that close proximity to the last game going to help with the preparation and the scouting for the First Four matchup?

SHEA RALPH: When you look at both of our teams from last year, we were very different. Both of our teams were very different. I always like competing against programs that want to be excellent as well. I have a lot of respect for Columbia and the job that Megan's done there.

Also, I have a lot of respect for Vanderbilt and the job that we've done here. I think that we both, I'm sure, are excited to be here and now it's just a matter of rolling the ball out and playing.

Q. Can you talk about Sunday, being there and all the -- it was exciting and hearing your team's name being called? Can you just talk about those emotions and seeing Jordyn and Bella have that opportunity?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, it's funny, my team and the people that are in our program know I'm a pretty laid back person. So leading up until that evening, I kept joking with my staff and my team, like, why are you guys nervous, why is everybody nervous, and then I walk in the room, and I was like, oh, my God, I'm a little bit nervous. And it was only because I wanted it so bad for our team.

Then when you walked into the room, I knew we were going to be okay because we had -- our team was there, our staff, our coaches, the people that always travel with us, but we had a contingency from Vanderbilt that was unbelievable. The support system that we have there, our

administration, specifically, doctor Candice Storey Lee and all the things that she's done for us from the moment that I stepped on campus, you could feel that energy in the room. Our players felt it. We had a blast, and then obviously when our name was called, the celebration began.

But not in that moving forward, more of a celebration of our season and understanding that we really earned that moment. We enjoyed it, and then we were up late into the night trying to figure out how we were going to get here, which was fun as well.

So it was a very exciting day, moment, something I'll remember forever, mostly because of the way that our players experienced that moment and seeing their faces.

Q. You have a lot of experience in the NCAA as a coach at UConn, but what advice are you giving your players since you've experienced this when playing at UConn in college?

SHEA RALPH: That's a good question. I think that -- there's not much advice. When people give advice, I'm always wary because my experience in college is a lot different than their experience in college right now in a lot of great ways. I mean, the tournament has grown, our game has grown, exposure has grown, media has grown. I want them to enjoy the moment, but I also want them to keep their head down and work.

One of the things we've been talking about since towards the end of the season is trying to eliminate distractions, not worrying about things that really don't matter, and focusing on the things that we can control, which is our preparation, our focus, our work on the court, our enjoyment off the court of each other and of the position that we're in.

So right now, I'm telling 'em, this is why we do what we do every day. Nothing is different, other than we're in the moment that we worked for all year, and now I want them to enjoy it, but I also want us to make sure that we stay focused on our preparation and nothing else.

Q. Congratulations on making it to the NAAs in Blacksburg. Obviously, losing season last year. What was the key to turning this program around and getting to the NAAs this year?

SHEA RALPH: The key -- I mean, there's a lot of keys, there's a lot of things that needed to happen, there's a lot of things that we wanted to happen, but probably the most -- the two most important things were patience for myself and our staff and our players and consistency in our work. The world that we live in now is very much an instant

gratification kind of world. I mean, I can go on Amazon right now and have lots of fun things waiting at the hotel when we get back after practice, and that's just the world that our kids live in.

What I'm trying to get them to understand, not only as a basketball coach, but as a human being, is that great things, really great things, are hard to get. It takes time and effort. Sometimes even when you work really hard, you don't get 'em. But it's not about the result. It's about the process and who you become through that process, relationships that you build. The type of person that you can become depended on to be day-in and day-out will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

So while our job here as a basketball coach is to compete for championships, and that's what I love to do, I'm passionate about basketball, I think we also are trying to focus on that bigger picture. Once we got our players to understand that this is a process, yes, we want to come in here and win, but that may not happen today, tomorrow, next month, next year. Let's just keep our heads down and do the work every day. There was a little bit of -- not pressure taken off but relief in understanding, let's just get a little better every day, let's focus on who we can become through that, and then when they picked their eyes up and looked ahead, it's been, you know, a year out and we're exactly where we wanted to be in that first meeting I had with team when I got on campus.

So it is exciting for me as our coach, for them to see that hard work does pay off. It pays off. Great things do take a lot of time, sometimes, and a lot of effort and energy, but if they can learn that and only that, then they're going to be okay for the rest of their lives.

Q. When did you realize you might have an NCAA tournament team on your hands this year?

SHEA RALPH: I mean, I always think we're going to win. I mean, I always think the teams that I'm going to coach and the players that we bring in are going to come in and want to compete for championships and it's just a matter of what do we need to do to get there. So I would tell you that the day after we lost last year in early March, my staff -- I was not a fun person to be around last March. We were very focused on making sure that we were competing this March in the NCAA tournament. So in that moment.

And then when we got our players on campus was also exciting. When we got 'em on the court, we're like, okay, I think we can be pretty good. Now it's up to us not only to help them, but also to not screw it up.

Q. What are the strong suits of this year's team?



SHEA RALPH: I think we're pretty gritty. We have more weapons offensively. We're a little bit more versatile. I love our defensive intensity. But when I get that question, I think more about intangibles. So I think, obviously, we have more weapons in terms of offensive production. I think our players have improved. But when my team practice and when we talk to them about how we're going to win games, it's more about grit and resilience, and throughout the seasons, we've taken punch after punch this year. We went on a little bit of a skid in the SEC. Early on, we had to fight to win some pretty tough games. I think that just developed our team into a really gritty, resilient bunch, and that's who we are. I think that's probably our best asset.

Q. Curious, when you took over -- obviously, physical capability is a big part of the basketball, but I'm curious about how much attention was paid to changing the mindset and kind of believing that can you actually win instead of just talking about it?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, that's also another great question. It's a layer of what I was talking about before. Like, about making sure that we focus on the process. So one of the things we had to do when we got in was really -- people talk about rebuild and all that, it was more of a healing process for this program, because remember this was right after COVID, too. So the team, this, our team in particular, was one that had opted out. We had a bunch of kids that transferred out that played a lot of minutes and scored a lot of points. The other players I think just wanted to be sure of me and my intentions with them as their coach, on and off the court. The staff that I was going to hire, the vision that I had for the program, and then for me asking my team to be consistent and patient, I have to show them what that looks like. I think when you're a leader, you can't ask people to do something that you won't do yourself day-in and day-out. So the things that I asked my team to do, that particular team, I showed them what that looked like every day. This is what I want you to do, let me model it for you. This is what I want you to do, let me model it for you. So it was more of a building a trust in them and also me elevating the level of expectation and standard of our work ethic, on and off the floor, in the classroom, of our involvement in the community, of how we treat each other. I think that they really appreciated that. So when we came in, it was us, me, showing them an investment, this is what it looks like to have a championship culture. That doesn't mean win, win, win, win, win at all costs, that means I'm going to show you what it looks like to work hard, to hopefully get the results that you want. But no matter what, this is who we're going to be, this is how we're going to act, this is how we're going to represent Vanderbilt University, and this is who you're going to elevate yourself

to be on a daily basis. And they really loved that. I think they really needed that and wanted that, responded to it really well. That gave us the opportunity to show a little bit of improvement, and then continue to bring in the pieces that we knew we needed to get where we need to be on the basketball court so that we could be more competitive in basketball games.

Q. You talked a little bit about nerves on Sunday. But today your three girls walked into the press conference at the NCAA tournament singing, looking very relaxed, looking like they're actually living in the moment and enjoying it. I don't know if you saw that when they walked in, but is that the mood that you kind of are getting from them, the vibe, I guess?

SHEA RALPH: It is. It is. Good work. It's a vibe, right. They love to vibe. That's their vibe. It is a mood that I see a lot with them. It's a mood that I encourage. I want them to feel relaxed and confident, because I want them to feel prepared. So we talk about this a lot. They know who I am, they know my expectations, my standards, and they know that I do want them to enjoy this moment. But they also know when we go out there to practice in about 10 minutes that we're going to get an hour and a half of really good work in. And that that encourages, after we get off the court, that encourages that mood of confidence and freedom, because I think our players know that we're ready.

Q. Vanderbilt has been in this tournament 27 times, but nothing in the last 10 years. Can you speak to what it means to be back in March Madness?

SHEA RALPH: I can. First of all, I'm really happy to be back here because, before coming to Vanderbilt and I had some time at Pittsburgh, where the last couple years we went back to the tournament, but this is what I know. This is what I know as a basketball player and as a coach. One of the things that I was reminded of early on was that a lot of players, and especially the ones when we got here, they have never experienced this, this March Madness. There's players that play their whole college career, a lot of 'em, that never experience moments like this. I've been so lucky to know what it feels like and to compete for championships and win them. I want so badly for our players to do that, but what I do know in the hiring process when I talked to Candice, our athletic director, was that that is the expectation of Vanderbilt. We talk about maximizing our full potential as student-athletes, as people, we talk about daring to grow, and Vanderbilt women's basketball has a tradition of excellence and competing for championships and being in the NCAA tournament. Candice had a very clear vision, as did I, of doing the same things, which is why I think it's been such a wonderful,

even though it's been hard and challenging, it's been wonderful the last couple years, because we have so much support outside of our program and administration. We have the same level of expectation and we have the same values. We're going to do it the right way. We're going to focus on doing it the right way, and then we're going to go out and compete for those championships. So, yeah, it's been 10 years, but we're right back where we should be and we're really excited about that.

Q. Curious, are you much of a pre-game speech type person, and since this is your first one as an NCAA tournament head coach, what will the tone of that be?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I, shockingly, because you guys know who I worked for for 20 years, Coach Auriemma is an incredible speech giver. I am not a big talker in general. I don't like to bore people, and that's -- I'm not exactly the speech giver that he is, I'm more of an action person. I'm not, let's talk about things, I'm more, let's go do them. So one of the things that I encourage in our group, my assistants do a lot of pre-game talks. I do a little bit more as well, like preparation and game planning. It's more of a group effort, which is what I want our team to see, and I want and I expect from our team as well. I don't dominate the pre-game talks, but, you know, I always have a few things to say that usually I don't share with the media, and I think that's the way that it should be. I am a fiery, passionate coach, but they're always going to get a positive vibe from me too. I'm just that kind of person. I like to operate that way. That's not who I am as a coach, that's just who I am. I have a really great staff, my coaches are awesome at going in and giving energy as well, so I want to make sure that our team feels it and hears it from everyone, not just me.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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