

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

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

Cassell Coliseum

**Columbia Lions**

**Megan Griffith**

**Abbey Hsu**

**Kitty Henderson**

**Cecelia Collins**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and open up the floor for questions.

**Q. Of all of the reactions I saw during the selection show on Sunday night, I think this group's was the most fun to watch. I'm not sure if you even knew that the camera was in the room because it didn't look like it. Everybody just celebrated totally unaware of what was going on. But describe that moment to get to this point after coming so close last year, you got here this year. We'll start with Abbey.**

ABBEY HSU: Yeah, I keep telling everyone I'm going to remember that moment the rest of my life. I think our celebration just sums up the type of team we are. I think we had a bloody nose, then (laughing), and everyone was just tackling each other, but we were just so happy, and to be able to do it with this group it means so much, and like you said, like, what we've been through the last couple years, it's just -- it's a long journey coming and we're just so excited to head into this tournament.

**Q. And Cecelia, your thoughts.**

CECELIA COLLINS: Yeah, I think that day was kind of a roller coaster of emotions, to say the least, so ending off on that high note was definitely a lot better of a feeling. But yeah, this team is just super special, so I'm just super excited to get going in the tournament and we know the job's not finished, so we want to get going.

KITTY HENDERSON: They said it pretty well, but I think



there was all sorts of emotions in that room. There was tears, there was happiness, there was everything, and I think it just summed up, like, our love for each other and the way that we have worked so hard to get to that moment. I think that last year, obviously getting so closing, it meant that much more this year. But yeah, like C said, we're ready to go and we know the job's not done.

**Q. So you're ready to go but on a really short turnaround. You've got to travel, you've got to get here to Blacksburg, you're probably not going to have time to get on the court until today. What has the preparation process been like for Vanderbilt? Kitty we'll start with you.**

KITTY HENDERSON: Yeah, we are very lucky. We have an insane coaching staff that will literally study the other team until 4 a.m. or whatever it takes. They've prepared us really well. We've obviously got our scouts and we're ready to go with their actions and their personnel and we've obviously been watching film as well.

But I think there's also a big focus on us and what we need to do in this game. So as much as you can look at the other team, I think you also have to think about what actions you're doing and that's kind of what we've been focusing on ourselves and how we're going to attack the game and how we're going to play our best basketball together.

**Q. Do they mind that you would called them an insane coaching staff?**

KITTY HENDERSON: No. They know that that's a good thing. We love crazy people at this program. (Laughing).

**Q. Cecelia, you're new to the fold for this season. Obviously, this is a university that has great academic tradition and reputation, but what did you think you were getting into when you came to this program?**

CECELIA COLLINS: Yeah, I mean, I've talked about it before, but like even the first time I talked to coach G, I knew this program was something special. The way that she was able to transform this program in a few years,



even, and just looking back and watching them and how connected they were last year, even despite not making the tournament, I mean, it's just special.

So being able to come here in my first year and make the tournament is obviously something I'm super grateful for and that wouldn't have happened without them.

**Q. Abbey, being here for the long haul with this program and culture-building and building to this moment, what has this meant for you to see it come to fruition, to see this NCAA tournament berth come out of your hard work and the hard work your team has put in?**

ABBEY HSU: Yeah, it means a lot. When Coach G was recruiting all of us, she had this vision in mind and knew that this program was capable of it. So just to see her blueprint kind of come to life it just means so much. Just like every team I've been a part of here, all the seniors that I've graduated with, they're a part of this just as much as we are. They've helped this just as much as we did, so it's just -- like Coach G always says, it's hard to do something for the first time as a program, but it's so worth it to go through all of that hard stuff, so I'm just so happy to be part of this program.

**Q. Abbey, curious, what is it about this year's team, why was this the team to get that goal accomplished?**

ABBEY HSU: Yeah, I think we're just -- the young girls that have come in and players like CC, like our transfers coming in, we're just so mature at every level, so I think -- I also want to give the credit to the seniors that graduated last year. They have kind of helped build this culture and I think we withheld it and almost like stepped it up a level this year. So I think just learning to play together. And I don't really see our freshmen as freshmen. I think they have come in and made an impact right away. I think just having those types of players around you, it really makes us a better team.

**Q. Are you guys annoyed that you have to play a First Four game and can't go right to the round of 64, or are you okay with having to play tomorrow?**

ABBEY HSU: Oh, yeah, we're totally fine with that. We kind of see this as a revenge game. We've played Vanderbilt in the past and we're just super grateful for this opportunity. So we'll play any day of this week. So we're just happy we get to continue our season with this team.

**Q. For the folks coming to the game, will this be a fun game to watch? Will you be a fun team to watch?**

CECELIA COLLINS: Yeah, I mean, I think we're a pretty fun team to watch, if I do say so myself. Yeah, I think it's going to be a competitive game. Obviously, Vanderbilt's a good team. Any team that gets into this tournament is a very good team. Like we said before, we're going to come in prepared and ready to go, but, yeah, I think it will be a good game.

KITTY HENDERSON: Yeah, echo that. I think Abbey's been talking about our culture and I think you can see that in the way that we play together, so, yeah, we're looking forward to showing that tomorrow and it will be a good game to watch, for sure.

**Q. For all the players, talking to Coach G week-in and week-out it always seems to be the wins are the team followed the plan and when things don't go well, it's like they didn't follow the plan. Kitty, you mentioned it a few minutes ago that the coaching staff is going to get you prepared. How do you guys make sure that you do your thing, you follow the plan to the T?**

KITTY HENDERSON: Yeah, I think we always say that we fall back on our preparation, and so I think it does start with practices like today and even practices that we had yesterday. You have to kind of get into the groove and kind of set that standard in practice. So we've been doing that all week, obviously, and then also just like mentally preparing ourselves, I think that's a really big thing as well, and knowing the game plan in your head so that when you obviously have pressures and the defense is on you, like, you know what you're doing and you're calm in that moment. So I think that preparation is a really big part of that.

CECELIA COLLINS: A lot of times when we're not sticking to that game plan, it's we're just getting disconnected. So just making sure we stay connected like the whole entire game, bringing each other in. Even after a turnover or whatever, a missed shot, making sure that we stay connected and keep reminding ourselves what we're supposed to be doing.

**Q. Is there any recollection from the game last November -- I know Sacha Washington was the only main player to come back for this game on Wednesday, but do you remember the pace or the style that Vanderbilt played?**

ABBEY HSU: Yeah, obviously, we did review that game and everything, but I think what's unique about this year is that we're a pretty different team and I think they're a little bit of a different team. So yeah, I mean, we know -- the players that were there last year, we have studied the game, so we are looking forward to it.

KITTY HENDERSON: Yeah, I think, like Abbey said, we are two really different teams to last year, but I think the biggest thing that Abbey also mentioned before is this year's kind of like a revenge game. I don't think we gave 'em our best last year, so definitely looking forward to giving them that tomorrow.

**Q. Can you speak of the Ivy League championship game? You ladies played a really hard-fought game against Princeton. What did you learn from that game and how are you going to prepare for tomorrow's game?**

KITTY HENDERSON: I think, yeah, we did fight really hard in that game, but I don't think that we stuck to our culture and our -- like, the way that we want to play. So I think we actually learned a lot from that game and I'm sure that we're going to put those things into this game this week. So I think the main thing -- C kind of touched on this, but just being connected and staying with each other, especially after mistakes. It's going to happen, it's inevitable, but I think that the responses you have to those mistakes is the most important thing. I think that's something that we really learned from that game.

CECILIA COLLINS: I think Kitty said it. That game wasn't really up to our standards, so making those key adjustments, and obviously you dive back in and you watch the film and you don't want to dwell on it, but you want to learn from those mistakes. So just going into that film and trying not to make those same mistakes as we did in the Princeton game, but luckily, we were given this second chance for the tournament, so obviously we're super grateful and we want to go in with no regrets.

**Q. With this bid, alongside Princeton's, the Ivy League is now a two-bid league. What do you think this means, generally, for the profile of Ivy League basketball on the national stage?**

CECILIA COLLINS: It's super cool that -- like, obviously a Mid Major conference can get a two-bid -- like two bids to the tournament. We obviously -- having our tough non-conference schedule that obviously helps you a lot. So, yeah, like we said before, we're super grateful, but we all obviously thought that we deserved this chance and I think Coach G, even after that Princeton game, made it a great case for us and why we should have this chance to be in the tournament. But, yeah, we're just super grateful and I think this goes to show like you can't overlook Mid Majors.

ABBEY HSU: I think she said it really well. I think the Ivy League's one of the most competitive conferences in the

country, so I think us having a two bid was, like, a long time coming and I think we have a chance to prove why we deserve these two bids.

**Q. Anybody been to Southwest Virginia before or is this the first time?**

CECELIA COLLINS: I played Virginia Tech last year with Bucknell. I think it was our second game. So this is my second time being here.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Best of luck tomorrow. We'll have questions for Coach in just a few minutes.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll take some questions for Coach at this time.

**Q. I asked your team about the moment they found out they were in, and what we saw on television was this awesome display of joy. How did you experience it from your seat and what were your emotions about that moment with your history and with your build-up of this program?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: It gives me chills just thinking about it. It was so special. The word joy is exactly -- it was the purest form of joy I think I could have even -- that's the perfect word for it. I was sitting next to our associate head coach, Tyler Cordell, who is my best friend, and that moment was to be shared, I think, for us. Like, I pretty much tackled her when I saw our name pop up. Again, our staff and our players, everybody that's been here since I came back home to Columbia has really helped us pave the way and it's taken every step that we have taken. That's what I'm most proud of, is that we didn't skip steps to get here. We didn't just get good in a year. It's taken a lot of time.

So that was just an accumulation of seven and a half years of work and we got to enjoy it in that one moment, which was very special.

**Q. I asked Abbey about building culture from year to year, but last year, after being one of the first teams out to this year, what do you think were the changes in terms of whether it was approach, whether it was scheduling, whether it was whatever factors to get over the hump and to get in?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Yeah, there's a few. I honestly think -- we had no national relevance before last year, right? We were talked about a little bit, we had been competitive in the Ivy League, I had coached at Princeton, we went 30-0.



Like, there was some history with me in this league and being alumna as well, but we took some big steps last year. We scheduled the way with intention. One the NET came out, we were like, all right, this is a major deciding factor of getting in the tournament, so we have to make sure we put ourselves in the best possible place, win or lose, but to be in the conversation.

For us to have beat Miami at Miami and then go to the Elite 8 last year, showed me, okay, we're doing the right thing, right? So this year we had the same model pretty much. Our scheduling coordinator, Allie Bassetti, on our staff, she and I put on our heads together and said, who do we need to play to make sure that we're in the conversation when it matters and, you know, that's exactly what we did with intent.

I know the Committee takes a lot of things into consideration with this. So now we've been talked about. And then what we did in the WNIT last year only showed to us and Kansas being probably the two first teams out in playing at Kansas in front of 12,000 Kansas fans last year and having a close game, I think really helped, again, create that history for us.

**Q. What are the strong suits of this year's team that has helped you get to the NCAAs for the first time?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: We talk a lot about -- especially last year's team. I had so much talent on last year's team. We had an amazing talented senior class. And I always say that you recruit what you need, not what you have. So when you're going through the journey, you realize what are we missing. One of the young women sitting up here earlier, Ceclia Collins, was exactly one of those people that we were missing, one of the keys. And I remember watching her last year while we were in our run and she was playing with Bucknell and saying, like, we need to get that kid. The versatility she provides, her decision-making, her poise, her ability to score. She is one of the reasons, I think, it all works, is that she gets to put it together for us much like a Kaitlin Davis and a Hannah Pratt did for us. Shout out to Katie. She's in the tournament as a 1 seed for USC. So for us, again, it was just getting the right personnel and getting better and smarter, honestly.

**Q. USC was sitting right here last year too?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: It's amazing, yeah.

**Q. For people coming to the game tomorrow, will this be a fun game to watch? Will you be a fun team to watch?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Most definitely. You're going to love

it. You'll see the intensity and passion that this team competes with. We play a very up-tempo style of basketball, we share the ball at a high rate, we love to shoot it, and when we do, we play defense, it's pretty good. So that's the thing. I'm just kidding. In all seriousness, our team is a lot of fun to watch. We love to get up-and-down.

**Q. Saturday night you talked about the importance of Abbey being seen by basketball fans across the nation. When fans tune in tomorrow night, what do you want them to know about Abbey, your team, and the conference?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Abbey is the epitome of what Columbia basketball means to me in the perfect embodiment and representation of it. She is the hardest worker in the gym. I remember her freshman year she won every sprint as a freshman, she worked hard. I mean, she was still a phenomenal shooter, but it wasn't about that for her. It was about how do I do things. It was her approach. And her growth here, it's no coincidence that our program has grown alongside her and gotten to this place and every year has improved because of her mindset.

She's absolutely a pro. She's WNBA worthy. I'm hoping everybody gets a chance to see her on a national stage because she is one of the most special and electric college basketball players right now in the game. I think for Columbia, this is just one small step in the right direction for our program. I said when I came back home I wanted to be a championship program -- a sustained championship program, not just a one-off program. We're trying to show people right now that we can win and we can win often and frequently. I'm excited to compete. I think it's going to be a lot of fun tomorrow night and we're ready to get going now.

**Q. Iyana Moore, Jordyn Cambridge were injured, didn't play in last year's game against y'all. When you look at the team this year versus last, do they play a similar style, number one; and two, how does your strong non-conference schedule and playing Princeton three times prepare you to handle a tough defensive team like Vandy?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Yeah, Jordyn is a very experienced player. She's been in that program for awhile now. She's an elite on-ball defender. I think that really helps them having somebody that knows the game, knows them so well, and thinks the game at a really high level. I think, again, they're different. I think Kitty said that. They are definitely different than last year. They're going to mix up what they do defensively and, again, for us to have faced, like, to your point, one of the best defensive teams in the country, not just this year, but every year, has really helped

and prepared us. For Princeton to be a 9 seed, which I have a good feeling for them in their matchup, but that only gives us confidence knowing, hey, we know how to pick apart these teams, but we got to do the game plan. Our players alluded to that. We got away from that in our championship game, which cost us against a very great, well-coached Princeton team as well. So we're going to be ready for tomorrow. I can tell you that.

**Q. Abbey played with USA Basketball in the America's Cup last summer. How do you think that experience elevated her game and allowed her to now compete with any player in the nation?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Just to be amongst 11 of the other best college basketball players in the game, she realized like, hey, I'm here. I think the relevance for her was really, really critical and the exposure to what USA Basketball does, how it works, the coaches in the game, the experience playing against the FIBA America teams, which are physical and tough and older. For the U.S. to be so young in that tournament, it was a great experience. They got beat up a little bit, I think, but came out and got that silver medal. It was just a phenomenal pro experience, which I think really has helped prepare her to take this next step into becoming a more complete two-way player and a future pro.

**Q. Was there any moment or moments during the season being in the Ivy League, such a competitive league, when you really saw the team jell and come together and be battle-tested?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Most definitely. I can definitely point to our last win over Princeton at home, but I think what was even more important is we had -- in our back-to-back games, which this NCAA tournament, these are quick turnarounds, we played on Saturday and a back-to-back Friday, Saturday. Here we are playing Wednesday, traveling in between, with the potential to play on Friday again and then Sunday, right?

So I think the back-to-backs -- one of them that I remembered was our Dartmouth-Harvard trip, we had some players not feeling well, and so did they, and that's just what happens in the course of a season. You're not going to put blame on that, but to not feel well but do whatever it took, I saw that from our team. I saw a second-half effort at Harvard from our team that I hadn't seen, because they were just making plays to make plays. You could literally see -- and Kitty alluded to this, the responses were elite from them, turnover, sprint back, don't let an easy transition bucket.

Those are the things that make teams great, is when things

don't go your way how much and how well do you respond. That's why that game and that weekend was really a key moment for me.

**Q. Speaking of the Ivy League, now that you have the two-bid, the league is being talked about, what does that say about these Mid Major conferences going forward?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: It shows hope, I think, for everybody that the NCAA is watching us and the Committees are watching us and that our body of work matters. I think that you need to have these small successes so that every other Mid Major program and conference in America can say, hey, we can do that, right? Because it takes somebody to do it first or second for you to believe that, hey, I can do this too and this is something that can be replicated.

I was at Princeton when we got the only other at-large berth in conference history in 2016, and I remember that and how big and monumental that was for our program at the time and the league. I can tell you, I've had so many -- not just Columbia people, but Ivy League people, reach out to me talking about, thank you for helping move the needle forward. I can say that Gonzaga, Portland the same thing for them to do that with their conference, it just, again, it brings hope to everybody, hey, like we can do this, but we've got to do the things that are in our control with the scheduling and make sure we're putting ourselves out there in the non-conference as well.

**Q. What do you love about this program and what you've built that you want everyone who will watch the game tomorrow to know about Columbia?**

MEGAN GRIFFITH: Great question. Columbia is my home. I grew up there. I walked on campus in 2003 and here we are 21 years later with the dreams that I had as a player coming true now, as a coach. And to know the community is behind me and that these players have really just embodied and embraced all of our cultural standards, I think is the greatest thing I want everybody to understand. It takes time, it's not easy, it is not easy to win, it is not easy to win over consecutive years. I remember when I first got the job and I have an alum that joked we are the 400th program out of the 362 individual and basketball -- or however many there are. We often joke about that now, but it was true. We really came from all the way from the bottom to be here in this moment. So I hope everybody can see that this team is going to play with so much passion for the game and for each other and you're going to see a work hard, play hard, love hard mentality out there tomorrow. So I just hope everybody can see through our play what this program is about and how much we love



each other and care about each other.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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