

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Fairfield vs Kansas State

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Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Memorial Coliseum

Kansas State Wildcats

Coach Jeff Mittie

Serena Sundell

Ayoka Lee

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, and welcome to Lexington. Thank you for joining us for the press conference today for the Kansas State women's basketball team. We are joined at the podium by head coach Jeff Mittie and student-athletes Ayoka Lee and Serena Sundell.

Q. What have you been able to learn about Fairfield so far in your preparation for tomorrow?

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I mean, what I have seen out of them is they are winners, and they know how to compete. And just the way that they've dominated their league, they're going to come out and find a way to play against us.

We know they're good shooters. We know they are quick. They have a lot of three-level scorers, and they love to get out in transition.

But overall, yeah, they're just competitors. So it should be fun, a fun team to play.

Q. I know that Fairfield likes to run a lot of five-out stuff. They don't have the size to compete with you, but how do they sort of defend bigger post players that they sort of played against, and how do you sort of attack that?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, that's a great question. Yeah, I mean, from where we are in our scout right now, I'm not -- I mean, we're not super worried about how we're going to -- like our offense, but we know they like to get out and run.

So that's definitely going to be a part of how they attack



that, getting the ball in transition. But I think our coaches have done a good job with all our centers, like just helping us be prepared for anything.

So however they decide to guard it, I think we'll be ready on both ends. Yeah.

Q. Speaking about the five-out, there seems to be a trend now where teams are looking for post players to also be perimeter or outside shooters as well. Obviously you've been more of a traditional post player. What would you say to someone who's coming up and getting ready to start college now, how would you advise them on playing the post? Would you recommend that they build on the outside shot or just stay true to their game?

JEFF MITTIE: She's never missed a three in check.

(Laughter.)

So if she can avoid any three-point shots this tournament, she will go down as a perfect three-point shooter.

AYOKA LEE: I'm a strong believer that there's always going to be ways that you can improve your game. So I would never want to put like a young player coming up in a box.

Yeah, I definitely have been a more traditional post, and that's just where my strength lies. And I think our coaches and our team have done a good job of building a strong guard presence around that. So I haven't really had to really step out much.

But, yeah, I wouldn't -- yeah, I wouldn't want to limit any player to one thing or the other. I think having a strong skill set involves being able to and being willing to just do whatever it takes to fill the need that a team has.

Q. To follow up on your injury and where you are right now, are you a hundred percent, and are you -- how much are you expecting to play tomorrow?

AYOKA LEE: I feel like I'm a hundred percent. I don't



know, you might have to ask this one.

But, no, I'm in a good spot. We haven't really discussed minutes. But I don't think it's really much of a discussion. I don't know, yeah. So yeah.

Q. What is your mindset, last year having this opportunity? What have you guys been working on? What's your mindset coming in? What have you communicated with your teammates?

SERENA SUNDELL: I think our team is just really focused on doing one good thing at a time. So we want to come in and have all of our focus be on Fairfield and make it be one court at a time, one possession at a time, one timeout at a time.

So just staying present, I think, is going to be huge for our team, and that's kind of our discussions that we've been having.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I would say the same thing. Yeah, I think obviously we want to win, whoever our point is. But I think just being where our feet are and focusing on giving everything we have to the scout and that one possession and what's in front of us is where we're at.

Q. What are the emotions that you're feeling right now getting ready to get back on the court and play in March one more time?

AYOKA LEE: I'm really excited. It's been a while since I've played in a game. I'm just excited. It's a great opportunity just to be here and do it with this team one last time. So, yeah, excitement.

Q. How long did it take for the disappointment of Selection Sunday to subside and move on to the next?

SERENA SUNDELL: Not very long. I think we were ready for either outcome. And we knew that playing on the road would be a high possibility for us. So we were prepared for that, and I think we were ultimately excited to go into someone else's gym and have that experience for our team.

So I don't think the disappointment lasted.

Q. I'm curious, three years in a row now where you've had stretches without Yokie, but does it get easier to sort of reintegrate her into the offense and defense just because you've gone through it a few times now?

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, sure. I think our practices this week with her back have been really good. That's always

a thing, is when you have a player like Yokie who is such a force and such a threat and brings so much gravity, it just gives our offense a completely different look.

I think practices that we've had this week were smooth. We were figuring out how to play with her again, and I think we clicked quicker than we have in the past.

Q. Curious, you guys have put together one of the most successful teams in K-State history. Now that the moment is here, what does that moment feel like?

SERENA SUNDELL: I'm excited. Every team wants to be playing at this time of the year. Like I mentioned earlier, being grateful to be in this opportunity, being present, also knowing that we're very capable. Just gets me fired up.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, fired up I think is a good word for it. At least for me, it feels like there's so much basketball left to be played, and I think that's what the rest of the team feels like. So, yeah, we're excited.

Q. How relieved are you that Ayoka is healthy right now, not only for you to have her play, but for her to be able to play one more time in March?

JEFF MITTIE: What she's done for our program is special. To have her to have that opportunity when she's battled through so many injuries in her career, and for her to want to.

Boy, we thought we were getting her back at one point, she played four and a half minutes, I think, against KU and had problems with the other foot. And I think it would have been real easy for her to go, Look, I've battled all this, and it's just too much right now.

And she just loves her teammates, I think you can see that, loves K-State. And so for her to be healthy, and not, you know, the unknown, for her to want to do this and to have a good week of practice, that was something -- that was a reason she made that decision at the time, was in talking to the doctors, in talking to trainers and everybody, this would give her the best chance to not only play in the tournament but have some prep time to do it.

And, you know, so far, so good. So I'm excited for her. And you can see how excited she is about the opportunity. So, yeah, it feels good to have her be in this moment in her career to have battled through, gosh, so many things that she's battled through. It's pretty cool.

Q. Kind of along the same lines as I was asking Ayoka, are you seeing fewer true post players now as you look to recruit? Are you seeing more players that

are having that outside shot? How does that affect you from a coaching standpoint in how you look to set up your offense for future years?

JEFF MITTIE: You know, one of the things that -- we are, except I would say that in the Big 12, we've got some of the best post players in the country, and true post players. You got to see one of them last night, Audi Crooks, play and win, and that was a good win for Iowa State, and congrats to Bill Fennelly on his 800th. I texted him last night, and that was a good win.

But she's a good example of another true back-to-the-basket center. But you've got Sedona Prince at TCU who's been excellent. Brea Cunningham at Arizona. We've got a number of these type of players in the Big 12.

Now, to answer your question about stylistically across the country, I think all these young ladies are getting more skilled. They're able to step away from the basket. They are able to face up and play. And I think, as you're seeing youth basketball progress, that they're getting more training earlier, where not just to stand in the paint and play.

And so I think you're going to see that continue to progress. Yokie said it, the game has evolved. The game evolves all the time. So on one hand, you get the five-out, and then you're right back to running Tex Winter's triangle stuff. So the game's evolved, and it will continue to evolve, and new stuff will come into it.

But to Yokie's point, a player embracing what she's good at and not trying to be something that they're not, there's a lot of room for players like that. And I think so many players want to do so much that they're, you know, jack-of-all-trades, master of none. And I think there's still going to be a lot of basketball for players that can hone in on what they're really good at.

Q. Obviously you don't want to be facing the adversity you faced this season in the moment, but how much do you feel like the challenges that you did face this season are helping you right now and your team mentally heading into the tournament?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, it's definitely given us a boost in practice. I think when you have an All-American come back in practice, it gives you a boost of energy, it gives you a boost of confidence, all of the above.

No, we'd rather play with her. I think we ended up playing 11 games without her in league games this year. Two years ago, I don't remember what the number was. But we've been through it before.

And Serena referenced that. I do think the integration back in has been much quicker this time. And part of that was the fact that we went into the offseason saying, you know, we have to get our offense to where we can function with or without, you know, Yokie being so reliant. So we were able to grow that group up.

I think going into the offseason, some of the growth of Walker and Sides was going to be critical to do that. And then the addition of Poindexter. And then the addition of Kennedy Taylor as a backup center. All of those things have been a big part of our success.

But, you know, it definitely gave us a boost to get her back this week. As I stated to some of our media back home, it went better than expected because I kind of thought we might have some gaps in the preparation of she's available on Wednesday, but it's a little sore on Thursday.

Fortunately for us, we didn't have that. She was able to do most of the stuff. And so it has been a big boost to us.

Q. I know we mentioned Fairfield playing that five-out, but when they play a team like you where you have that size, how important is it to have three-point shooters around them that can make threes consistently, which has been a strength to you guys this year?

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I think it's going to be -- Fairfield plays a style that we don't see a lot in terms of just how fast they play and how much they shoot it. They're top 15 in the country in field goal attempts from three. They're efficient at it. They play at a pace that will be a challenge for all of our centers.

But at the other end of the floor, we've got to make them pay. And Yokie referenced it. They don't play a lot of centers like Yokie. So in looking at film, we don't really know how they're going to play. Are they going to double team her? Are they going to front her? We don't know. It's our job as coaches to prepare our team for all of the above, right?

And so we're doing that right now in terms of our preparation because there will be an element of the unknown coming into this of what their decisions are.

But I think you asked the question about the three-point shooters around her. It helps. It helps. Because if they want to give extra help down there, then we've got to put as good a shooting group around.

And that's been a big key to our success this year. We've

got Sides, Poindexter, Jaelyn Glenn, all have made over 65 threes this year. That was the goal going into the year, and we think that has made us better.

Q. You mentioned not playing a lot of teams like this. Have there been any teams this year, maybe last couple of years, that have played this style that you can go back on, or is this sort of a unique challenge in that sense?

JEFF MITTIE: Oklahoma always played super fast and wanted to get up a lot of shots and wanted a high-possession game. So they would be the ones that I'd probably reference the most that Yokie, in particular, has dealt with in her career, because they've always -- whether it be you're defending on the perimeter.

The one thing I -- it's -- I'll talk about Yokie because that's how people try to attack her, but when she redshirted her freshman year, she was just this small-town kid from Minnesota that just didn't know anything and just, Whatever you want me to do, Coach.

And as a center, I told her, You need to be a basketball player. And we started the process of her defending threes, right? Because knowing that that's -- you take a program like South Dakota State, who we've played over the years, and they have forwards that pop out and shoot the three.

So Yokie has done that from day one. And even coming back from the injury, I mean, Yokie just loves to compete, and she just views herself -- everybody says center, but she's a basketball player.

So I think we're prepared. But I will say this. I'm very impressed with Fairfield in terms of how fast they play and how quickly they get organized. Many teams that run don't run with five people organized as well as they do. So that will be a big challenge for us. And in particular, it will be a big challenge for the centers.

Q. You just mentioned Kennedy Taylor's development over the course of this year. Obviously with Ayoka back, she'll be playing a good amount of minutes, but with Taylor off the bench, talk about a little bit more about her development, what you've liked and how that can complement Ayoka if her minutes are restricted a little bit, or what that will look like with Taylor coming in to play.

JEFF MITTIE: Good question. I've been really pleased with Kennedy's develop here in February. I thought she had a really good February. I thought he continued to grow against the Big 12 competition. It was really -- as we -- as I

referenced earlier in the press conference, the strength of the league, there are a lot of really good centers. So I thought Kennedy really, really played well.

You know, one of the things I will go back to, though, Imani Lester has played well and Eliza Maupin has played well. So we'll play a deep rotation at the center spot. And that's been I think an advantage for us throughout the year.

We have been able to grow up some of those young centers, or new centers in Kennedy's case, and we've seen -- we've seen our depth there be pretty good. And we were doing that with Lee because we were trying to even limit -- I don't want to say limit minutes, but we knew we needed to grow up those centers. So we were able to do some of that throughout the year.

Q. Building off of Kevin's line of questioning, how do you balance trying match Fairfield's playing style versus trying to make Fairfield play towards your strengths?

JEFF MITTIE: I think there's always a balance of both. We need the pace. The best way for us to do it is to score, right, and get our defense set the best way. They'll run on misses, but we need a pace that we're comfortable with. We're comfortable running, but our shots are need to be different than Fairfield's shots.

And so that's how we'll balance it, good shot selection. I think our team understands that part of it for us is that we've got to make sure we get inside touches. We've also got to make sure that we're not in a three-point-shooting contest with Fairfield. But I think our team understands that.

Q. You're here, your team has had one of the most successful seasons in K-State history. You have a special group of seniors who I know mean a lot to you. You're on the doorstep of the NCAA Tournament. Just what are the array of emotions going through your mind right now as you sit here and you think about this special group of seniors, the special season and the possibilities going forward?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, I don't think -- I don't think that -- my mind really doesn't wander to those things in terms of the emotional side of things with the seniors. I mean, you know, my job is to prepare them the best I can because we want this to go as long as it can.

And so, as you know, you've got a group that has committed to both the good and the bad. And that's why this group has meant so much because in a college experience, you're going to have to do both.

And in a world where sometimes when things aren't perfect, players are transferring at the first sign, this group has stayed together, the Jaelyn Glenns of the world, Serena Sundell, you even go down the line of Eliza Maupin, Gisela Sanchez. These are players that have been in our program.

And so, you know, Yokie and Serena have obviously been here the longest, but our staff's job is to prepare them the best they can so it gives us the best opportunity to continue to practice together, have more practices together, have more film sessions together, have more meals together.

You know, this has been a special group. So we want it to continue as long as it can. So our job is to keep preparing and keep putting them in the best position to be successful.

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