

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vermont vs Louisville

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KFC YUM! Center

Louisville Cardinals

Jeff Walz

Imari Berry

Elif Istanbuluoglu

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Cardinals and will open the floor to questions.

Q. For both of you, just seems like this team has taken huge strides in the growth and development from last year to this year. I guess, what have you guys seen in this team, and what were you able to do that has allowed the success that you've had this year?

IMARI BERRY: I would say everybody being coachable with Coach Walz and just listening to what advice he has to say and doing what he says. I feel like last year we didn't really do that, but this year I feel like we really demanded that with the people that was coming in. I feel like we did pretty good this year.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Yeah, I think when you have good people around you, you have a good staff, you have good teammates, and if you are willing to do better every single day, and the results came because of that. I think that's why we're doing better and better every day. We're willing to be better every day, coachable, learn. We are just having a good time being with each other.

Q. For both of you, what's the preparation been like this week getting ready for the first round games? Has it changed much from what happened in the regular season, or is there anything new that has taken place?

IMARI BERRY: I feel like it's kind of been the same. You know, first couple of days we were focusing on us. Then as the week came, we started focusing on the team that we're about to play now. I just feel like it's been the same as it's been all year.



ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Yeah, I'd say the same, because we have the mindset same the whole season. Obviously NCAA is a big tournament, but I feel like Coach Walz has emphasized every single game matters the whole season. I think, yeah, we were doing the same.

Q. Elif, for you specifically this year from last year you're having a lot more success. What's been the key to you having such a breakout season in your junior campaign?

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Working hard, to be honest. I spent two years, and Coach Walz was with me the summers, too. I was with my national team, and he was there. I think that was a big part for me to have this growth, because he saw me playing for my national team with the pros, and I feel like -- I'm, like, yeah, I want to be this level. He was, like, okay.

Then I trusted him, because he was pushing me every single day. Every day, the first day from my freshman year until today. I'm so grateful for him, because this is the reason. I was in the gym every day. I think that's why, yeah.

Q. For both of you, what has it been like hosting the tournament? I know it's not something new. You have hosted plenty of times, but what has it been like hosting this year and maybe not having a ton of success at home this year? How has that changed your mindset a little bit?

IMARI BERRY: I mean, last year we went to TCU last year, so it was kind of hard getting on the road and going to away places, but now that we get to host this year, I feel like it's more easier on us. We get to rest more. You know, it's kind of easy just getting a couple of rests and being relaxed.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I'm excited to play at home. Our fans, they're amazing. I cannot wait to play in front of them, and especially NCAA Tournament.

Yeah, in the season we had a couple losses at home,



which was not usual, but it's a new tournament. It's 0-0. So we just let that thing in the past, and now it's a new opportunity. Again, we have the best fans. I think we are all excited to play in front of them.

Q. Just a follow-up to that, how much of an advantage does that give you all? Obviously you just said last year you were at TCU. Now you're at home. The home crowd advantage, to getting to sleep in your own bed, how does that help y'all?

IMARI BERRY: I feel like it's good. I feel like the fans just being there on our backs and getting the crowd ready. If we score, we have the crowd to lift us up. It feels good.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Energy and confidence, because yeah, we can feel them really, yeah.

Q. Just going off of that, there will obviously be some tweaks that you would make to approaching this more as a business trip. With how things have gone at home games this season, how has that dynamic of just switching things up and having that mindset really helped you guys so far?

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Again, it's a business trip. Yeah, in the season we had losses in here, but again, we try to let that pass.

Again, it's 0-0. We're going to go one by one. I think that's what we're focusing on. I mean, we love playing at home, so I think we have another chance. I think we are all excited to use this.

IMARI BERRY: Yeah, I agree with her. You know, just treating it like kind of more of an away game than a home game. I feel like just changing our mindset to that, I think it would be good for us.

Q. It's been two weeks now or almost two weeks now since the ACC Championship game. Another close game against Duke. Looking back now, what do you guys feel that you need to work on so that if you're presented with a similar challenge down the road, that you can overcome that challenge?

IMARI BERRY: I feel like we just need to control what we can control, and just, like, when it comes down to the wire, we just be focused and execute what Coach Walz has drawn up on the board and see what he has to say. I feel like that's something we kind of been focusing on in practice is just, like, listening to what he has to say and just doing it in practice.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Yeah, that's exactly right. To

be honest, she said everything.

THE MODERATOR: We can let the Cards go early. Appreciate your time. Welcome Coach Walz in. Coach, a quick opening statement on the weekend ahead.

JEFF WALZ: Just want to congratulate the other three teams that are here as well. Great seasons by everyone. I want to thank all of you for coming out today and just really looking forward to an opportunity to host here at home.

Would like to thank the NCAA men's side of having our men's game at 2:45 tomorrow and not noon. So really do appreciate all of those that helped with that, because I know that very well could have been a noon game as well and wouldn't have been a pretty sight.

Hopefully we'll get all of our fans to come down, watch us play at noon, and then go out and find a restaurant, bar, a tavern and watch our men's team, and hopefully come back and watch more basketball here.

Just want to say thank you for them.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. I know you've talked plenty about this being a business trip, and you guys having a little bit of struggle this year at home. Just talk a little bit about how you're reminding your girls of block out all of the we're at home type noise, I guess, if that's your strategy.

JEFF WALZ: No, we're not saying that. We just have made this where we're staying in the hotel. We're going through all of our routines like we would when we're at the ACC Tournament.

You talk about our struggles at home. We lost by one, two, three, and four, I think. It's not like we've gotten blown out at home, but we've got to finish games. Obviously we had that same problem at the ACC Finals. Up four with a minute to go and had the ball and didn't finish.

It's more so just making sure we can keep them focused. We know exactly what's going on. We're kind of controlling what they're doing to make sure any time we want to watch film, we're going to watch film, we're going to have team meetings, we're going to make sure we go over personnel.

I'm very impressed with Vermont, so we're not going into this looking past anyone. If you are playing here in this tournament right now, you're a good team. So it's a trip that we're making as it's a two-game tournament. You've got to win the first to get to the second.

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Q. Jeff, do you have an update on Skylar Jones?

JEFF WALZ: Yes, she will not be participating. She's no longer with the team, so we've just parted ways. It's best for both parties.

Q. Just going off of that, Jeff, how does that kind of change that guard rotation, because obviously she was someone that you were looking to kind of step up a little bit?

JEFF WALZ: Yeah, I think if you go back to the past month, it's really not going to change much. In our ACC Finals Mack played all 45 minutes. Yeah, I'm not concerned about that with Reyna, Imari, Taj, Mack. Bender can step in there and play some minutes for us. Laura can move to the three if needed.

We have plenty of players. I mean, at this time of year, look what Sienna men did with five. You're just putting your best ones out there. Unless they're in foul trouble or they're about to just keel over and die because they're exhausted, you keep playing them. It's not you're saving them for the next game.

So I've never been one to just sub to sub. We have plenty of depth with Imari coming off the bench and Reyna.

Q. Jeff, in the men's tournament the last couple of days there's been a lot of talk about the mid-majors not getting their chance against the higher seed programs. I know you've made it a practice to play some mid-majors before. Is that happening in the women's game also? If so, why is that?

JEFF WALZ: I'm not sure about that. We've always played. You want to call mid-majors. We've always played good basketball teams. Ball State is a really good team. So we played at Middle, at Western Kentucky.

For us you're really trying to schedule regionally if you can, especially being here. There are so many good teams. We tried to put a schedule together that's good for us, and it's always going to include mid-major teams. Yeah, it's one of those it's more difficult now for us to do a home and home and go on the road and play than at Western when we're going to lose gate and ticket sales here.

With everything that's going on in college athletics, we need to play as many home games as we can, especially with the draw that we get in our fan base. So, yes, some might be, like, well, you aren't willing to go play at Western Kentucky. Well, that's a home game that I'm losing. We used to do that all the time. I mean, we played at South

Dakota State. We played at Missouri State. We played all over the place at mid-majors.

Well, now it's more difficult, because there are finances involved and big numbers.

Q. What's the biggest thing between the Duke game and the ACC Finals, and now that you've been trying to instill in your team to get them not just through this one, but further in the tournament as well?

JEFF WALZ: Well, there's really nothing. We sat down and watched the game. We watched the end, and we just didn't rebound the basketball, made a poor decision or two going down the stretch. We missed a free-throw.

I mean, there is a lot of things that took place, but I also tried to explain to them at the end of the first quarter we only had two team fouls, and our goal was to when they got the ball inbounds, foul. To do a take foul, to make them throw the ball. We didn't, and Ashlon Jackson throws in a three from about 28 feet. Well, that had as big of an impact as the last minute of the game.

So that's what we're trying to explain to them. Every minute counts. When you are out here playing now, the first five minutes are just as important as the last five. So it's more so just making sure our focus is on point for all 40 minutes.

Q. Jeff, statistically you guys have improved significantly in every single category from last year to this year. This sophomore class specifically seems like it's taken a huge leap. Imari said the biggest key was just them listening to you a little more this season. How have you just seen, I guess, them be more coachable or just to be able to take that stride?

JEFF WALZ: They're a good group of kids. I'm very fortunate in my staff. Everyone involved, if you talk to anyone that works with our team from marketing, administration, will tell you they're a good group.

They're a year older. Then we add Laura and Reyna, who both of them have been very important to us just with how they handle things, their day-by-day. They're seniors. You give Imari more confidence. You give Taj, you give Mack. You know, Elif, for her it was the opportunity to play with the Turkish National Team. She had the opportunity to see how pros work.

I was just texting with Merissah Russell, who came back from Istanbul from playing with the Canadian National Team. She said what an honor it was and what an experience to actually watch how professionals train,

because it's a whole new level how they take care of their bodies, the way they watch film, and that's what Elif was able to see.

Everything has clicked for her and changed because her work ethic and her approach. It's not that you have to spend more time in the gym. It's just maximizing the time you put in. So she has grown a ton.

It's really all of them, and that's what makes it so exciting you've got players that continue to get better year in and year out. Then we've got kids that have already resigned to come back for next year. So you're sitting here, and we've got five right now, six -- I just talked to one today -- that say they're coming back. Five of them have signed.

You're not sitting there going, okay, well, are they coming back, are they not? We've put all this time into them. We've helped them get better. They're invested not only in our program, but in each other because they want to be on good teams.

A lot of kids are going to go out for a money grab, and that's fine, but I've watched some go and get paid well, and their team sucks. You know, they're happy because their bank account is good, but it's a terrible experience for a whole year to get the crap kicked out of you and lose. Where I've got players that we're doing as well as we can, we're compensating and taking care of them, but they also know they're getting a great experience and having a chance to not only prepare to win here, but win in the future for their opportunity to hopefully play professionally, if it's in the WNBA, if it's overseas, because they're playing against really good players every single day.

Q. Just a follow-up to that, with those players that you've been able to resign, how nice is that to have that out the way so that when whenever the season is over, you know exactly what you have, what you need to look for in the portal, that sort of thing?

JEFF WALZ: Oh, it's great. I sat down with one today, and I won't speak who. Not all of them. A lot of them have agents, and what's going on now -- it's the same thing in the men's game in football. We're all getting phone calls from kids that are still playing, from the agents going, hey, you know, she's been told she'll get this amount if she stays. Will you give more?

It's just what's going on. That's why I think we're going to wait until April the 7th to open the portal. It's the dumbest shit I've ever heard. Let's just do it a week after their season ends, so then you've got schools that are finished. Kids are already telling the media, I'm going in the portal, I'm going in the portal. So it's out there.

Just a week after your season ends. Then you know either I'm transferring or I'm not, and then you're not going to get blind-sided, which we talk mid-majors. You've got a kid who tells you your season is over right now. You've got a kid that says, I'm coming back. Then on April the 9th they walk in your office and say, hey, I've decided to transfer. The only reason is because they got a phone call from somebody that said, you can get \$200,000 from this school. So it's just all about the cash.

So your season ends on the 5th. You have until the 12th to go in, because then you're transferring because you're not happy, you want more playing time, or you really are, like, hey, I'll take a gamble and see if I can make more. Then you're also -- because there are a lot of kids that go into the portal that stay in there. They give up a scholarship because they think they're better than what they are and then don't get an offer.

So, yeah, it's crazy. Everybody talks about, oh, it's going to make it easier. No, it's not. It's the same thing. Just open it up seven days after your season ends, but then just say you can't go on campus for a visit until April the 7th, because that's where the hassle has been.

When we played in Seattle in the Elite Eight, we get beat, we red-eye fly home. We land at 6:00 in the morning. Jayda Curry landed at 7:45 from a red-eye for her official visit. So we got off the plane, went straight to the airport, picked her up, and started a visit.

So if you just sit there and say, you can go into the portal, but you can't go on a visit, makes way more sense for everybody. So all this crap that's going on right now, it's still going to go on, but I don't think it will be as bad.

Then you've got programs that aren't going to be just ripped apart at the last minute because all of a sudden now, okay, I've got 150 for a two guard, and now you're pulling them from somebody's team where the kid said, I'm coming back. So that coach was not out looking for a transfer.

That's just my 2 cents, but what would I know?

Q. Coach, this is the first NCAA Tournament with the coach's challenge. What's it been like for you as a staff to adjust to using that tool this year, and how impactful do you think it might be over the next few weeks?

JEFF WALZ: I think it's been great. I'm not exactly sure what our record is on it, but I think we've done pretty good. I mean, there have been a few times where I'm going to

call a time-out any way because a run might be going on, and I'll just be, like, just review that. Who did the ball go out of bounds on, because sometimes you never know what they're going to see.

But for the most part, if we see something, if we see it, we've had a pretty good success with it. I like the fact in our game that you can keep calling them if you want. I mean, you'll just get a technical foul if you're wrong, but I think it's important. Why should you lose it? Why should I lose my challenge if I'm right? It makes no sense.

So I think it's really smart the way we've done things in women's basketball, because there are some plays that are going to come down to it where it's a bang-bang play. You're trying to see who the ball went off of, and the officials, they're trying their best, too.

When you can go and review it in slow motion, it's a lot easier to see.

Q. You mentioned Laura earlier. What impact has she had for the team this season?

JEFF WALZ: Well, she can score the basketball. She passes the ball. She is second on our team in assists. She's our leading rebounder. She understands the game. She's been a great piece to what we've been able to do. Her leadership, just her knowledge and experience are things that you can't replace.

Her and E have played really well on the floor. They pass the ball well to each other and just a really good tandem that we have with those two out there.

Q. Circling all the way back to that first question that I had asked you, but you had said about finishing, and that's what you want your girls to focus on. What does that mean in your eyes?

JEFF WALZ: Score more points than the other team. That's our No. 1 goal. We got to be able to at the end of the day when you have a lead, you've got to hold the lead. You've got to be able to execute and knock down a shot. You've got to be able to get a shot off. We have had some opportunities where we didn't even get a shot off. Just small things like that.

I've said it from day one. We don't have Dana Evans on the floor. We don't have Shoni, somebody that you just get the ball to and get out of their way, and they're going to get a shot up. They might not make it, but they're getting a shot up on the rim. They're going to cause another defender to have to come help. Then we can crash the glass.

So we've worked on a few different things trying to give us a better opportunity to make sure we're getting a shot up. So then when we do, if it doesn't go in, we have a chance to rebound the ball.

Q. Along those lines, Jeff, I remember after the Notre Dame game, you were talking about the lack of movement on offense. Obviously you had a good run in the ACC tournament. Are you happy with where the offense is now, or are you still wanting to see more from them?

JEFF WALZ: I thought we played really well at the ACC Tournament. I mean, obviously we lost the last one, but if we win that game, which we should have, I don't think anybody is asking me if the offense is struggling.

We play well. We move the ball well. We passed it well. We shot it well. Now it's just a matter of making sure we close these games out. They're all going to be really good games. I mean, I'm expecting a great weekend of basketball here.

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