

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Rhode Island vs Alabama

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KFC YUM! Center

## Rhode Island Rams Coach Tammi Reiss Albina Sylva Sophia Vital

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the KFC Yum Center in Louisville for the 2026 Women's March Madness. We appreciate student-athletes from the University of Rhode Island joining us now. Questions from the room.

**Q. After the championship game, Brooklyn talked about wanting to work on having a better first half in the NCAA Tournament. Is that something you all have worked on in practice over the last week and a half? If so, what specifically have you worked on?**

ALBINA SYLA: I feel like we've been working on a lot of different stuff. That has been something we've been working on, but in different ways. Every single first half has been different, and I feel like it's just been pulling everything together from the start, like the way we end practice, the way we start practice.

We're concentrating on the way we start practice because we like to practice how we play. So we like to make practices even harder than games. Especially like starting practices with a lot of energy and a lot of intensity is our goal. So, yeah, that's been something we've worked on.

SOPHIA VITAL: I definitely agree with that. We definitely take practices very seriously because we do want to practice how we play. It's really been important for us to start practice really well, like Albina said, and practice really well.

**Q. Both of you are such unique players in terms of style. Albina, you being a true post, it's mostly stretch 5s now and everybody wants to shoot 3s. You work on the block. Sophia, your ability to rebound at your**



size and be a disrupter is sort of unique in guards across the country. I wonder how you both arrived at the way you play in this lineup and how you've developed our strengths over the course of the year.

SOPHIA VITAL: I think just in the beginning of the season, we kind of had a conversation with the whole team and the coaching staff about certain roles that we have on the team. For me, it's just being a true point guard and leading the team and just doing the little things that nobody else really wants to do, the dirty work is my job.

Albina's job is punishing people in the paint. We just had that conversation from the start, and we've just carried it out through the whole season.

ALBINA SYLA: Adding to that, yeah, I think we had a really good conversation, like Soph said, before the season started. I really liked that everybody has really done their jobs really well and gone into their roles really well. I feel like that also helped me a lot to play and do the stuff I've done.

Now it's really like, okay, my team needs this, and I have the size for it, and I'm going to do it as best as I can. And I feel like doing that has given us a lot as a team.

**Q. I know it was a while ago now, but there aren't a lot of double-digit seeds who have experienced getting a win like you did over NC State on the road. How much do you feel like that game, looking back, helps prepare you and helps you get ready for a game like this in a road environment like that?**

ALBINA SYLA: I feel like it helped us a lot just being used to having big crowds but also having those big crowds where they really want us to lose and we only have each other there. It's only us against them. We only have the coaches. We only have each other.

I feel like games like that really helped us stay connected and really battle tested us to where we can play tomorrow and be confident as a team that we've been battle tested and we just need to go and play hard together.



SOPHIA VITAL: Kind of just going off of what Albina said, just preparation. I feel like that NC State game prepared us for the rest of the season and all the tough teams we've played and prepared us to play all the tough teams in this tournament.

We're coming in this tournament to really compete, and I feel like NC State proved that we can really compete with these type teams.

**Q. Albina, you mentioned you guys worked on a lot of things over the last week and a half. For either or both of you, what else did you work on both before you knew your opponent and afterwards?**

ALBINA SYLA: I feel like for me, it was mostly we had -- I feel like we had so much time compared to the season. The games came, like we had a game every three or four days. So it was nice to have the extra time to work on shooting, on finishing, on finishing through contact. Those small things that usually you don't have time to do during the season, especially during the end of the season.

So I feel like, for me, it was a lot of different finishing, a lot of different small stuff that helps you in the game that you don't really notice, like different kind of defense stuff too. Stuff like that.

**Q. Your coach obviously is very close with Dawn Staley, played with her at UVA. She mentioned on the Selection Sunday show she'd have Dawn speak to you guys before the tournament. Did that happen? If so, what was Dawn's message to your team?**

SOPHIA VITAL: So that didn't happen, but it could still happen, and we're just waiting to hear some wise words from a really good coach.

THE MODERATOR: Well put.

**Q. Albina, Coach and Coach A obviously put so much emphasis on international recruiting. I went to college an hour from my house. You made a huge commitment to come from Finland. What went into that decision and how you got to the point you felt confident that Rhode Island was the place you felt you could come and be comfortable. What courage does it take to go that far away from home?**

ALBINA SYLA: Well, the confidence came through the coaches. I had a great relationship with Coach A, with Tammi especially. It was interesting because I talked to Coach A for a long time until I talked to Tammi. But when we talked, it was like she has been coaching me for many years.

It takes a lot of courage. It's really hard, but it's my family being there for me, it's my friends from back home, my friends here, my teammates here who take really good care of me. It's stuff that nobody sees, but it means everything to me.

Also, just the love of basketball. When you love playing the sport and you love doing it, it takes you all around the world. For me, it took me to Rhode Island, and I feel like I'm really blessed to be part of this group and this school.

**Q. For either or both of you, is there any team that you've played this season that you think resembles Alabama that you've been able to take that experience into your practices?**

ALBINA SYLA: I feel like Alabama is a mix of a few teams. I don't feel like we've played anybody quite like them. It's a mix of a few A10 teams, a few teams we've played before conference started.

So it's good to see how we get to put everything we've learned through the season to the game.

SOPHIA VITAL: What Albina said. Like Alabama is kind of like a mix of Davidson, they can shoot the ball really well. George Mason, they're really physical. And also Richmond that can shoot the ball really well. Playing in the A10 has really helped prepare us for this game.

**Q. This is a fun question. Albina, I don't know if you'll have an answer to it. Are there any childhood March Madness memories or things you remember that make you extra excited to be playing on the March Madness stage?**

SOPHIA VITAL: I don't know about childhood, but I remember the girl from Notre Dame. I can't remember her name, but she's really good. She hit two buzzer beaters in a row. It was crazy to see. It's like, dang, I could be there one day. That's a cool memory for me.

ALBINA SYLA: As an international, as a kid, I didn't watch a lot of March Madness. But I remember when I was a teenager, like early teenage years, just start seeing these during March Madness all these clips of these crazy shots. And I don't remember, but I feel like it was a men's game and this guy, like it was a random guy who just made this crazy 3 and they won the game.

I feel like I was, like, I would love to play in one of those games one day. I feel like being here today is really crazy. I'm really excited. I've heard a lot about March Madness and what it's like so I'm really excited to experience it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. Good luck tomorrow.

SOPHIA VITAL: Thank you.

ALBINA SYLA: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, welcome to Louisville. We appreciate your time today. If you don't mind, opening remarks about being here, and then we'll take questions from the room.

TAMMI REISS: So excited, first of all, to be in Louisville. Great basketball city. Love to play in the Yum Center. Really, really ready to get playing. It's been almost -- it feels like a month. So we flew in yesterday. Team's ready, getting focused.

I thought we were playing today. All last night, I said tomorrow to the team. They're like, Coach, we play Saturday. So we're excited to be here. Team's excited. We're ready and just proud that we're representing the University of Rhode Island and March Madness, first time in 30 years. So great to be here, great to be in Louisville, and we're just ready to go.

THE MODERATOR: Questions from the room.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned first time in 30 years that you're here. Obviously, you were able to experience this as a player a good amount of times. Your first time as a head coach, what's the sense you've gotten of how special this is for this program and these student-athletes, and what's it like to be back?**

TAMMI REISS: First of all, it's a pleasure to meet you, Talia. I follow you on social media. Thank you for covering women's basketball. You do a great job. So thank you.

The girls are extremely excited. We've had one player experience March Madness before out of our 14. Just one. And so the feeling is gratitude and excitement and joy and fun.

And the one thing from my past experiences as a coach and a player is really keeping them focused. The distractions are galore. The littlest things, from media availability to the gifts in the locker room, that sets them off.

All the little things that are different than a normal regular season game or even an A10 tournament championship game, it's the distractions. You lose focus on why you're here, and you got to keep them laser sharp.

So over the past couple days, it's really mental focus. It's really approaching their mentality and trying to explain what they're about to see. Not just the competition on the court. Everything off the court.

So that's been our biggest focus as a coaching staff is really mentally preparing our kids to stay focused, stay sharp, and no distractions. No distractions. We're here to play a game and to win a game. One game at a time, 40 minutes.

**Q. Tammi, you were in the tournament recently with Syracuse so it hasn't been since you were a player. But the question remains just when you check into the hotel and you see the facility and you see the swag in the locker room, whatever else, how much has the event grown from the time you were a player at Virginia?**

TAMMI REISS: When I was a player at Virginia and we went to our first Final Four, we had to play back to back. There was no day in between. There was no rest because of TV.

The explosion of the game was just happening so you were lucky to get coverage. You were lucky to get a gift, a water bottle, a towel. Since the early '90s, where our game has gone, I've never been prouder. And the women that have paved the way for the game, you can now see where we're at, television rights and the WNBA, it is just an explosion.

As a pioneer, and I'm not that old. There were Pioneers before me, Nancy Lieberman, Annie Meyers, Anne Donovan, you name it. To be a part of that, of where it was to where it is and get to have this group of student-athletes experience that, there's no bigger joy.

But the game, everything about television, our coverage, media, it's just a whole different bear. It's on another level, and I've never been prouder to be a part of women's basketball.

**Q. Without giving away your game plan for tomorrow, what are some of the keys to the game for you and your team?**

TAMMI REISS: First key of the game is take care of the basketball. You have to have 10 to 8 turnovers against 'Bama. You have to take care of the basketball. We must get shots and score. I'll give you the keys to the game. We've got to do us. We're focused on us.

Second one is transition defense and offense. We have to play at great pace, and we have to keep them out of the

open floor.

Third, defend the 3. They shoot the ball at 36 percent 3-point, and they've got a lot of 3-point shooters. A lot. Defend the 3, run them off the 3-point line, make them take tough, contested 2s. The last one is when you play an SEC basketball team, you better rebound. You better box out. And they're big, they're strong, they're physical at every position.

Those are the four key points that pretty much all year, when we do each one of those four successfully, we've been in games and been able to win games. So it's no different. Now you have to execute at a whole 'nother level against this caliber of team and, again, on this stage.

**Q. Albina went into detail about the way you're able to get kids to be comfortable in choosing Rhode Island and getting them to settle on campus. You and Coach A, that was something you wanted to do when you both came in. A few years on now, with so many success stories you've had from overseas kids, how do you look at that strategy and how impactful it's been for you?**

TAMMI REISS: When Coach Amadou and myself came from Syracuse and took this job, we knew we had to have a recruiting game plan. When you're really bad, you're last in the league, and no American kid or club coach will call you back, you had to have a plan.

Our plan was the pipeline from international route, especially France. We had a lot of kids who wanted to come and play here. So to get good and improve, you have to have talent. Our plan was international talent.

Now, how that's changed and morphed, once you start winning, well now people will call you back. Now you have a shot at kids you had no business of getting on the phone.

And so it started with the international pipeline. Once you do what you say you're going to do for them, their agents, their national team coaches, the pipeline comes because when you give them back to them and you do what you said, they love you. Here comes the next one and the next one.

It's no different than here with the AAU circuit. But as we've changed, as we've started winning, now we can recruit more in the States.

And I've really tried to balance it out now and not go so heavy international where I like a little bit more of my personality. A little bit more of the flavor, the energy, the communication, all the things that great guards bring,

especially in the locker room.

I need personality. I need energy. I like fire. I like coaching me. And so being able to find people like Brooklyn Gray to come and transfer here and not go Power 4, to be able to find Vanessa Harris signing a big-time recruit out of D.C. to get her to come here and not Power 4, now we're in the mix.

So now we've been able to branch out and use both, both routes, to really make us successful and try to sustain excellence.

**Q. You talked about the A10 tournament and even after the championship game, Brooklyn talked about wanting to work on having a better first half heading into the NCAA Tournament. Is that something you were able to work on over the last week and a half? If so, how has that been a focus?**

TAMMI REISS: You can try to prepare for how you start games. You plan practice accordingly, making sure you started practice with energy, everything you need to start a game. On this stage, it's really hard to prepare. Nothing is like a game. It just isn't. When those cameras come and the lights turn on and you've got 'Bama looking you straight in the eye, they're going to have to start really well and really disciplined and solid.

So what we've prepared, to the best of our ability, is starting practice where all our key points. Limit turnovers. Are we hitting and boxing out? Are we doing everything we need to do those first four minutes? By that first media time-out, can we execute our game plan? We've tried to replicate that every day in practice to the best of our ability. That's all you can do.

Now, how they react, their mental psyche once this game starts, some of these kids will have jitters. It's the natural way. How quickly can we settle down and be ready to fight and execute our game plan. First four minutes are key. They really are.

**Q. Coach, mapping out your first time in March Madness as a head coach, the break and managing your players' health, how did the players respond to it, and just how are they feeling entering this weekend?**

TAMMI REISS: After we won the championship, we had to give them a couple days off. There's a very big break before you even know your opponent. Getting their legs back, getting them healthy, giving them a good rest.

At this time of the year, it's really health. You've got to avoid -- you need a little luck. You've got to avoid

sickness, you've got to avoid injury. Getting their legs back, getting them refreshed. We took a couple days off and then really just focused on us until we knew our opponent.

Once we knew who we were playing, Alabama, then it's scout time. So we really didn't prep for Alabama but the last three days of practice is really implementing our game plan, how we're going to defend them, how we're going to score against them.

The prior week, it was all about getting healthy and focusing on us, taking care of the basketball, executing defensively, rebounding, transition. Everything we've done all year long. And they did a really, really good job. They stayed focused, had great energy, and showed up every day like they want to win a basketball game.

**Q. Coach, you talked about the keys to the game a little bit earlier. I wanted to build on that. Is there one specific player you're looking out for in Alabama and one specific player on your squad you're looking to deal with them?**

TAMMI REISS: Great question. There is one specific guard that I think is a menace. I think she has the total package. She shoots the 3 at almost 40 percent. She attacks the rim at will and leads their team. When they need a bucket, they'll run iso plays for her. That's Jessica Timmons. Leading scorer, a great guard.

To combat that, we'll take our all defensive A10 player, Ines Debroise. We'll match up Ines. We may switch a lot. In transition, you can't control who guards her, but we have a game plan for Jessica, and deservedly so. Great guard.

Even a big. They have a great big inside, Essence, and she can get the ball on the block, and she can score, and she can rebound. So we'll have to take the big away, and we'll have to take Jessica away.

However, their guard play is outstanding. It's not just Jessica. All of them shoot the ball at a 36 percent clip from the 3. They have multiple ones, and they're all great athletes that attack the basket, dribble, kick. Great decision-makers. So you're going to have to defend. You're going to have to keep in front. You're going to have to defend one on one and run them off the 3-point line.

What makes it so hard is the 3-ball sets up everything. As soon as the eyes go up and the pump fake goes up and you have to close out, well, here comes the drive.

It's what makes them lethal, and they're very well coached. Kristy does an excellent job. You know their game plan

offensively and, when you watch them, you know their game plan defensively. Credit to Kristy every year. I think this is her 14th season, 14 or 15 getting to the big dance, and experience, and I was just really impressed with the job she's done with this crew.

So guard play, we're going to have to defend it. And then inside, Essence is a problem. Going to have to keep her off the block and keep her off the boards.

**Q. Coach, I asked Jeff Walz this earlier today about scheduling in the women's game, and he mentioned that it's a financial issue now that, you know, where he would try to go to South Dakota State for a game, he needs that game here. From a Rhode Island perspective, you had games at Rutgers. You had games at NC State. Are you finding those games harder to come by now and especially so since you won at NC State earlier this year?**

TAMMI REISS: There are coaches in this business that they won't duck you. Wes Moore at NC State will call us every year to play and give us good money to play, and he doesn't duck. He wants to play top mid-majors.

And so for me, it's a little different story than Jeff because, yes, it gets difficult. But all the top mid-majors, and they're still net quad one wins. The Princetons and Villanovas, they'll play you. Fairfields, Richmond. Nonconference, not Richmond.

But they'll play you. And you'll always have great P-4s that don't duck, that not only will play you but give you great money. And then, in return, you can use that, put it in your pot, stir it up, and have some money for NIL.

So for me, scheduling is not really difficult. Two years ago, it was a little bit more. As we got good, the only difficult part of scheduling for us is no one will play us at home under us. I can't get a home and home with any team that isn't really good. They want money, and they want a lot of money.

So now our school stepped up and really gave us a great guarantee pot where we can go out and buy four or five home games. And in this realm, it's really, really important. You play at home, and you win. And so having that guarantee money has just, it's been a lifesaver for us where scheduling outside of that was really difficult.

Now that the university supports and gives us that made it so much easier. So this year has been really -- and we've gotten a handle -- as a first time head coach a couple years ago, scheduling, figuring out analytically how to get into the NCAA Tournament is probably the hardest part

about scheduling and then going about building that nonconference.

So as I've gotten better as a head coach with scheduling, and Adeniyi does most of my scheduling, we've really found a science to it. For us, it's been buy games at home and winning those games has been the biggest challenge. The past two years, it has not been due to the fact that we have buy game guarantee money now.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for your time.

TAMMI REISS: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Good luck tomorrow.

TAMMI REISS: Here we go! Go Rhodie!

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