

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC YUM! Center

## Louisville Cardinals Coach Jeff Walz Mackenly Randolph Tajianna Roberts

Media Conference

Louisville - 72, Vermont - 52

THE MODERATOR: We'll ask Coach for some opening remarks on the game.

JEFF WALZ: First, want to thank our crowd. I mean, what a great crowd out there we had, especially knowing that our men are going to be tipping off here in about 30 minutes. So really do appreciate everyone that came out. I thought it was a great atmosphere for a college basketball game.

Want to congratulate Vermont. I thought they played exceptionally well, especially in that first half. The young lady, Priede, I believe I'm pronouncing that right, because she deserves to have her name pronounced right, and Hanson were just so impressive.

They were impressive on film and even more impressive in person. The fight they played with, the competitiveness they played with, and then the shots they made, especially in that first half.

Every time we went on a little bit of a run and our crowd got behind us, they had an answer. And that's what I've seen from them all year.

They're extremely well-coached. You can tell the kids enjoy playing with each other. And it was a great basketball game. I told our kids, you're going to be in for a battle. This is a very, very good basketball team that's very well coached.

Obviously, I was pleased with the bounce-back that our



group had there in the second half. I thought we finally started to, you know, put forth our effort and really kind of tired them out some. Then we were able to get to the offensive glass and get some second-chance baskets that were really important for us.

So just excited to have the chance to move on. And looking forward to the next round.

**Q. Mackenly, this is your fourth double-double in five games. How comfortable were you feeling out there, and where do you feel you've taken the most strides, even from just the beginning of the year until now?**

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: I feel very comfortable. It's March and tournament. It's my favorite time of the year. I'm just glad we pulled out this win. And my team, we played really good.

**Q. Your defense got a lot better. You got some steals and got the ball knocked away a few times. Just talk about that, and how you were able to open up the game and not be so tense or tight, whatever, in the third and fourth quarters.**

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think that's what we talked about all week in practice was to pressure the ball and get up in them because we're a physical team. And when we pressure the ball and that back line gets in the gaps, we're able to get steals.

So our main focus was pressuring the ball and keeping one defender on the ball, so our bigs don't have to help and, then we would be chasing them all over the place.

That's what we tried to focus on. And I think in the second half we picked that up, and we were better at pressuring the ball.

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: Yeah, and if you watch back in that third quarter, a little slap-the-floor action.

**Q. You threw some press at them, especially in the first half. Just trying to mix up things, surprise them?**



JEFF WALZ: No, we were just trying to get the pace of the game faster. Vermont's a very, very well-coached team that really makes you work in the half court. So we were trying to take some time off the clock and make them -- before they got into their action that they wanted to run, try and at least run maybe seven, eight seconds, nine seconds off the clock, so then they're having to play a little bit faster than they might want to.

I thought eventually it wore them down some. And like I said, in the first half we got the lead to 9, I think, at one point in time, and just couldn't put the put-way punch or however you want to say it.

You've got to credit them because they made the shots when they needed to when we got some momentum going. Then they cut it to four there at the end of the half.

So they're a really, really good basketball team, and we knew that.

**Q. Mackenly, talking about that floor slap, how did that come about because I was looking down at my computer for a second. I heard the slap and I saw Laura with the biggest smile on her face. How did that come about?**

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: I mean, all week, like Taj says, we've been focusing on our defense and just our intensity on the ball pressure and all that different thing. I think it got us going a little bit and it got the crowd going. It's a little way to have fun and still be locked in.

**Q. How do you balance the fun? Because obviously this is your first time hosting since you guys have been here only two years. How do you balance that fun but also staying locked in, like you said?**

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think it's a part of the game. It's March. Not a lot of people are here. It's a great opportunity. So I think that's the best thing we can do is still have fun and play loose because that's when we're at our best.

At the same time while having fun, you can also know how to stay locked in. And I think we did a good job at that.

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: I second that. Just knowing what we've got to do with the scout and personnel, but also playing loose and playing free.

**Q. Was there a moment you felt like the game kind of shifted when you guys kind of got a little bit more comfortable and kind of took control? And if so, when was that moment?**

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: I would say we kind of just kept playing the same way. Like defensively trying to get stops, score a stop, just playing one possession at a time. And then we're not playing for the score. We're just kind of playing to make sure we're doing the right things -- rotations, defense, ball pressure and all those things. It really wasn't -- I don't know, just a good all-around game.

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: Yeah, I think in the first half, a lot of shots didn't fall that usually fall for us. But I think we tried to continue to maintain the focus, which is our defense. And I think we rebounded the ball very well.

So we tried to stay consistent in the things we can control, because we took great shots. We had great looks. They just didn't fall. We continue to control what we can control, and that was play defense and rebound the ball.

**Q. A lot of the talk has been on the defense. How do you think the defense has grown, and you've continued to improve on that side of the floor over the course of the year?**

MACKENLY RANDOLPH: I think it has grown just with our intensity. Like we've been talking about, the ball pressure and knowing where we're supposed to be in the rotations. Just all the little things. But mainly ball pressure and intensity and dictating.

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think it's just our intentionality, because we're a great offensive team. Like, we can score anytime. But our biggest thing is we have to figure out how to come up with stops.

And I think in certain games, we're scoring the ball, but we're just going back and forth. Us as a Louisville team, we have to figure out how we can get a stop. I think that's just the intentionality and the focus that we have been working on, is just how to get a stop.

**Q. On Mackenly, it's her second straight game with career highs in points and rebounds. I know you raved about her in the ACC Tournament, but what has her progression been like, especially this last month or so, that's allowed her to really kind of take over a leadership spot on the team?**

JEFF WALZ: Well, I think with Mack right now, it's her consistency and ability to shoot the ball from the outside. She's extremely strong in the post. She does a great job of finishing on post-ups, but at the beginning of the year she wasn't shooting the ball with as much confidence.

Now that she's been working on it, because she's able to

step outside and shoot it, you have to respect that, which is now giving her also opportunities to post up.

And she's as good as there is being able to use her body. You kind of call it bully ball. She likes to put her shoulder down and will create some contact and does a really nice job of it. And then she finishes.

She had six offensive rebounds in the game. I think three of them were her own on that one shot. But she ended up with a double-double, but she's always around the ball. It's not like she's out-jumping everybody.

But it's her ability to know where the ball is coming off the rim and going and pursuing the basketball.

And she passed it well today. She had three assists and zero turnovers.

**Q. Getting Gevi and Grace in, how nice was that just to be able to see that depth, especially at this time of the year when, you know, maybe some things aren't going right with Anaya, but just to have that overall post depth?**

JEFF WALZ: No, it was great. It's something that we talked -- I've been talking to them about the past week and a half since -- well, before the ACC Tournament. Trying to get them all locked in practice to understand that it might be four minutes, it might be three minutes, it might be two. Even the minute and 12 Bekah Graves played. You know her feet have really been bothering her. And I'm not sure she really wanted to go out there.

But I was like, Bekah, I can really use you so I can get Imari off the floor. And she's like, Coach, okay, I'm in.

It's things like that when you're trying to make sure everybody's prepared. And when you get out there, then you've got to be able to do something positive. And that doesn't mean you're scoring, that means you might make the extra pass, guard somebody, box out.

But a lot of times you're sitting on the bench and you're, like, oh, I'm not playing, and then your name is called and you're like, oh, shit, he really called my name? You're not focused, and that's one of the things I've been trying to talk to them about, when you get the opportunity -- you never know when it's going to happen -- that you're prepared for it.

So I thought Yevi did some nice things on the defensive end as well. And Grace got some minutes in. And it's good for them to get the opportunity to experience some postseason play.

And then Anaya, she's again, she started really late as a sophomore in high school playing basketball. And now defensively people kind of know what to try to do to score on her. And that's where we're trying to teach her, like, okay, here's where they're trying to attack you, so now you've got to make sure you are ready to play.

But I was proud of her. She stepped up and went 2-of-4 from the free-throw line, which was really big for us. She ends up with four boards.

So hopefully she'll be prepared for tomorrow night. Because today's game is a tough match-up for her, when you've got four guards out on the floor and then you've got a true post that can really -- she's really, really good at facing up, up-and-under moves. And it was a bit of a challenge for her.

**Q. Similar to what I asked the players, how have you seen the team grow defensively over the course of the season? And if so how do you want them to keep growing?**

JEFF WALZ: It's just one game at a time. You're trying to make sure that they understand the importance and the honor to play in this tournament. Not everybody gets to do it. And when you get the opportunity, don't take it for granted. That's really what we're trying to make sure we show our kids. And I was proud.

I thought the first half was good basketball. We missed some shots. We did not shoot it extremely well. But credit them also. And then we kind of got ourselves back. And I thought we came out defensively and did a better job in the second half.

Then we got some shots in transition. We posted up. We reversed the ball well. And then we executed some baseline out-of-bounds play at the start of the fourth quarter. We executed a play. So that's the fun part as a coach when you get a chance to draw some things up and you see them go out there and it works for them.

**Q. You were just talking about Rebekah. She doesn't play a ton, but it seems like she's always that energy piece. You look down on the bench, she's jumping around, seems to be more excited for the players themselves. I guess it's just from that standpoint, those intangibles, what does she bring from an energy standpoint, just kind of keeping the morale of the team?**

JEFF WALZ: No, she's great. She's a wonderful, wonderful person. I love her. She's always supporting her

teammates. Her teammates support her.

When we went into the locker room there at the end of the game and they brought the board out to put your name up on it, they wanted Bekah to do it because they know what she brings to our team.

And I tried to explain to all of them, everybody has a value. Everybody does. I got on my son's ass today -- he's our manager -- because he was slow to get the chairs out. And I was on his tail like I am our players. And then I saw him after the game. He's like, dad, I'm sorry. Well, faster.

So everybody has a value. It doesn't matter what you do. But whatever you're doing, you need to be elite at it. And that's what I appreciate about her, is she might not score 15 points, but she's in that gym, she's helping our kids, she's rebounding. She's cheering them on. She's encouraging them.

You need people like that, and we've been very fortunate here that we've had several over the years that you can go back to Shelby Harper who played here. She started as a walk-on and she made one of the biggest plays in the history of our program in that she turned Odyssey Sims one time when they had the ball with four seconds left to try to beat us.

I mean, I subbed her in. I was like, you've just got to turn her one time. And she did, and then she's got to throw up a half court shot.

It might not be 20 minutes. It might be five seconds, but you have to do that five seconds well.

I'm just proud of all of them because it's a grind. It's a long year. And when you're not out there playing as much as you want, but you're coming to practice every single day and you're still positive and encouraging, it speaks a lot about who you are as a person, the way you were raised.

And I enjoy those players as much as I do the Macks and the Lauras and Tajes that are out there playing for 30 minutes.

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