

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Ole Miss vs Baylor

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Waco, Texas, USA

Foster Pavilion

Baylor Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Media Conference



downhill. They get to the foul line. They've shot almost and made more free throws than their opponents have taken. So big key in the game is going to be playing without fouling.

Q. How much can you take from that physicality against GCU specifically against the physicality that Ole Miss brings?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I think it's different. I think we both play in physical conferences and I think the physicality is very much they're going to chest you up, we're going to chest them up. They're used to playing against elite, offensive and defensive teams in the SEC. Same as us. Their league wasn't as big. They didn't have the bigs that our league had but they had athletic bigs in the SEC but I think the game is going to naturally be physical. I think it's probably going to be a little less handsy. Like I just think the reaching, the grabbing, the clawing, we're pretty marked up from that game. I think the game will be more about body physicality and less about reaching, grabbing, that type of thing.

Q. Just talking about how good Ole Miss is in transition, seemed like that really killed you guys in the first half of that Grand Canyon game. How do you use that coming into this game and what's the mentality in that regard?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, first of all, you have to take care of the basketball. If there was a problem we had in particular early, we turned it over. We ended up with a couple possessions, two people laying on the floor. You're not going to stop them five on three, that's for sure. It's going to be a wave coming down the floor, I think. When our shot selection is better, when we're making better decisions, then all of a sudden you've got two back. You're not putting yourself in those type of situations, so I think a big part of keeping them out of transition is effectively running offense, taking the right shots, making the right passes, not forcing things, not taking spinning, fading type shots and staying on our feet and so I think that's a big part of the game is how we handle ourselves at the offensive end is going to dictate the way they run at us on defense.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Nicki, would you like to make a statement?

NICKI COLLEN: Sure, happy to be here, happy to have more of a voice each day. Really proud that we were able to feigned a way. I think Grand Canyon might have been a little underseeded. They know who they are. When you have 11 seniors that have played together, some of them for a while, some of them, but they really meshed well together. They started strong. They started really confident. They started like a team that's won 30 games in a row, and I don't think they really blinked even when they had a little bit of foul trouble. So proud of the way we executed in the second half, the way we defended down the stretch and the way we played inside out. Happy to play a really elite team out of the SEC, and I know when I looked at the top 68 and we were 14 and they were 17, doesn't seem like we should probably be playing each other, but I think you're going to get a really elite matchup, really athletic Ole Miss team.

Q. Nicki, I'm sure you scouted them yesterday. You probably already looked into them. What kind of things do you see from Ole Miss? They were really crashing the offensive boards.

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, elite. Elite getting the ball back. Sometimes it reminds me growing up during the Pat Summitt era, so often their perimeter shots really were assists that really got the ball closer to the rim. I thought they were shooting and almost fighting over who got the offensive rebound last night. I think they're elite athletically. They play really, really hard. That's just been a staple of Coach Yo, going back to when I was coaching at FGCU and she was the head coach of Jacksonville. They've always been really good defensively and gotten after it and played really, really hard, so I think they're a team that plays incredibly well in transition. They play



Q. Coach, another game at the Foster Pavilion on Sunday. What does it mean to you that you get another home crowd and also is there kind of a bittersweet feeling with the final practices at the Foster with the seniors?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I don't feel very nostalgic right now. We're very much in preparation mode so you're not thinking about that. I think when the final buzzer sounds, regardless of what the scoreboard says, I think that will kick in. Hopefully it's because we're celebrating and we can talk about that, but I definitely want Sarah to make a basket these last two games as good as she was defensively and I thought she was the difference had the maker in the game yesterday. The TCU game and last night, she didn't have a field goal in either game. I know I don't want that for her for sure, but I think this is what you play all season for. It's the difference between the men's game and the women's game. Some day our game will be at the place where these games will be on neutral floors, but until then, the resume that you build throughout the course of the season impacts your ability to be in these situations and it doesn't mean that Ole Miss isn't deserved. They clearly were one seed away from hosting, and so their resume is very, very good and I think similar to us, I think they got better as the season went along. I think they were playing their best basketball at the end, played Texas grade in the SEC Tournament and so I just think I'm excited that we get to make some noise, you know. That our fans get to make some noise and support our team and hopefully lift us tomorrow.

Q. Coach, Yaya scored a lot at Ohio. When you brought her here, did you tell her, give her a heads up what her role was going to be, that it was going to be this diminished and do you think that history has helped with her starting over the last month?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, first of all, one of our scalings, and I don't say this in a disrespectful way, but even when we're looking in the portal, there is a leading scorer on every bad team. Just because you're a leader scorer does not make you an elite player. Someone's going to get the shots. What we saw in Yaya is a player that we felt like had the ability to play at this level, to be effective at this level, but she was going to have to learn shot selection. When you're the best player on your team, when the playmaker, you can have four or five turnovers a game. You can take a lot of shots that we would consider bad shots because main it's a better shot than the guy next to you.

So a big part of Yaya's growth was learning to play in a system, learning to play with other great players, which is what she wanted. Yaya's dream is to continue to play and be a professional. You have to learn to play with good

players and you have to learn to pass the basketball and not just be right-hand dominant and drive downhill and shoot threes. I think Yaya learning to read screens, if you look at a year ago to now, Yaya had a really high usage rate last year, one of the highest in our league. A lot of that I attributed to when I got her in, I thought she was capable of giving us something that no one on our team could, the downhill ability, the and one able, but everything was for her to drive right and I went to her early enough and when I checked her in, because defensively, she was going to mess up. I wanted to get to them before they got to us, and so fast forward a year where at times we started her on San Antonio yesterday. We've put her on elite scorers. I don't start games with plays for her. I let her flow into actions and not put her in position where it's like go make a play. It's like let the game come to you.

So she's just come a long way and as much as anything, Yaya had to grow in her emotional maturity. She's a pleaser. She wants to do well. She's frustrated when she makes mistakes, when she turns it over and she had a hard time playing through mistakes and not turning one into two, so that's the biggest growth as she's gone from one year to the next. Even within this year, getting her over the hump. Anyone can see me grab her when she comes out of the game. It's the calming, it's like you're going to be all right. I'm going to put you back in. Relax. She wants to do well. It's not selfish, she wants to help her team.

Q. Coach, we were just talking to Sarah. She's in kind of the 1% of fifth years who stay at the same year. Looking back at when you first started here, how do you think your career here, I guess your start to Baylor would have been different if Sarah had not stayed from the transition of coaches?

NICKI COLLEN: I would have been busier in the portal, that's for sure. Everyone is different but this is home. Sarah says she's leaving but I'm pretty sure y'all are going to see her around. I just think Sarah has become -- Baylor has become home. It's comfortable and there are players who don't like being uncomfortable. There's nothing wrong with that. I like routine. Doesn't mean when things aren't -- you don't shake things up, there's adventure and fun and challenge and all of that and change, but I think for Sarah, I think her first year was really a fun year because I think she talked that whole summer as she was in her sling when I took the job and we were working through the labral tear and when she got subbed in when DD got hurt in that Elite Eight game and they didn't guard her and she wasn't confident enough to shoot it late. That was just, like -- that drove her. That drove her to never put others in position where she didn't want to take that shot, didn't believe she should take that shot and so I think she was really

motivated. I think her first year when she got to play with NaLyssa, once she turned the corner of NaLyssa, there's not a magnet and the ball doesn't have to go to her, I think Sarah became elite really fast for us and then I think what Sarah's had to deal with sense then, the food injuries, the wrist injuries, the you name it, she's found a way. Last year she wasn't as effective as she is this year because she's learned to play with a little bit of the limitations that she has based on her body, which she didn't have her first three years at Baylor but when you look these last two, she's played maybe with not the same burst and so change of speed, change of direction, when to give it up, not trying to do things you can't do, I think she's just learned to be a really elite passer and a really elite leader. I don't know what Sarah would do without Baylor to be honest with you, so there's two sides to that. Don't listen to what she says, because I don't know what she would have done.

Q. Coach Nicki, we all knew that Buggs would be back, but what was it like for her, for you, and for the team when she entered the game?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I think there's just a confidence that comes from having someone out there that they know is an elite teammate first and foremost. It's not always about what do you bring in terms of scoring? It's who is she the human?

I think Buggs is someone that makings everybody else better because she's not selfish, because she's going to set screens for her teammates, because she's going to rebound the basketball, because she's going to know her defensive assignment. She may not guard it perfectly every time but there's never a sense of she's not about winning, she's not about team, and so I think that was the biggest thing. There was some rust and I think it probably, in some ways when you look at what GCU was good at and then maybe Buggs coming back, they freaking attacked her dribble. There were two times when it was just like she put the ball down and it was gone. I think understanding you got to play lower against a team like that, you got to get your shoulder by them. You can't bet the ball out in front of you. Probably wasn't the easier game for her to come back in, but I thought she gave us really good minutes. I thought she had some really good defensive possessions late for us, some late blocks, late rotations and so we kept her right where we were supposed to and hopefully she just grows. It's not easy when you haven't had the rhythm of practice even though she's been back for eight days. That's still not game ready. It's not her seeing the ball go in the basket type of thing. I thought she did really well considering.

Q. Going along that Buggs tangent, you talked all season long about how you never want to take her off

the floor. How has it been for you, as a coach, to have to say, okay --

NICKI COLLEN: The hardest part was the look in her eyes in the first half. Buggs never drops her head. When I accepted her in the first half, I'm like you didn't do anything wrong. You didn't do anything wrong. My hard cap was 20 minutes. I took her out with two minutes to go and she was at 18 whatever and I thought they were helping off of her and we needed Bella's ability to stretch at that point and Bella hit that three late, which was really key, but it was more the look in her eye than anything for me, because it wasn't that she wasn't executing or not giving us her best, it was I wanted to have some minutes in the second half to play with. She played longer in the second half than she did the first half. It's not easy when you're someone that's used to playing 30, 32, 34, 36 minutes to be at that 15 to 20-minute restriction.

Q. Nicki, with their size, how important -- and they're hitting the glass and all that, how important is it to keep Nette on the floor as long as you can?

NICKI COLLEN: If you asked me that question first in every game I would tell you it's the most important thing in every game we play. It doesn't matter who we're playing. Nette is playing like an All-American right now. If Nette had played like this for the first half of the season, she would have been an All-American. She is putting up All-American numbers right now and so it's always going to be the most important thing because when we have the Nette that we've had the last month, we just have a decided advantage and I don't care who we're playing against.

I thought we got good in the second half because we recognized that we could get her the ball early and that we could play off of her, so when they were putting two to the ball, we made threes. When they doubled her, Yaya cut, gets a three three-point play.

I just think it was over time our team understanding that we're going to see different things from different teams. Not everyone is going to sit in deep early. Some people are going to bring the double late, but she's at the top of the scouting report right now. Your game plan has to be centered around what are we going to do? And the game plan might be let them go two by two by two and make it tough. That may be the game plan because that was the game plan against Oklahoma State. They didn't bring doubles all game long and then they went zone. That was their, okay, we got to do something. You have to have a plan. I think us learning what that plan is in the first five minutes, what are they doing? How are they guarding her? Are they fronting her? Are they fronting her with help? Do

we need to get the ball in the middle of the floor? Do we need her in ball screens? It's figuring that out early because she is the person that we get to play off, play through, and play to. Everybody's better when she's playing well. It's that simple. She took 13 shots. It's not like she took 30 shots. San Antonio took 26 shots in 26 minutes. It's not always about how many shots does she get, but the attention she draws is going to create shots for other people.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions?

NICKI COLLEN: So she needs to stay out of foul trouble.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Thanks, Coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports