

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

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Waco, Texas, USA

Foster Pavilion

Baylor Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Sarah Andrews

Aaronette Vonleh

Media Conference

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I was telling these guys while we were waiting that I looked up at one point and I thought, wow, this has to be a really good TV game.

You know, I thought down the stretch both teams made plays, one play after another to keep it tied, take a two point lead, tie it up, take a two point lead.

I just think they made one more play than us. As much as the offensive rebounds hurt us in key moments, the turnovers hurt us. When you look at the breakdown of the points off those, it wasn't as significant as it sometimes felt.

We did a good job of -- even when they would get second opportunities -- of getting stops. So thought they made one more play than us tonight. Made it at the right time.

I think if Yaya's three goes in we're maybe celebrating instead of a really sad locker room. But really, really proud of this team. Proud of their resilience. Proud of -- we started with Jana Van Gytenbeek going down the first game of the season.

We had Bella go down at Oregon. We had to bring Aliyah Matharu into the fold. Lost Buggs for a month. These guys kept clipping along.

I think if Netty had played the first half of the season like the last month of the season she would've been on that All-American and maybe first team. That's how good she was down the stretch.

And so hard to believe I won't ever be up on another one of these stages with Sarah Andrews, because we've been



together here a long time. She's going to miss me but I'll miss her more.

Q. Sarah, clearly the first question should go to you. What did your time at Baylor mean to you and how important -- Nicki said yesterday she doesn't know if you could live without Baylor. Is that how you feel?

SARAH ANDREWS: Coach Nicki can't live without me either. No matter how many headaches I give her. My time at Waco has been a great five years. It was great fans. I met great people outside of basketball, in basketball.

The coaching here was just amazing, and just to be here for five years, I wouldn't want to do it no other way.

Q. Netty, you were five for five in the first half, scored ten points. Was there anything they did specifically to kind of limit your touches in the second half?

AARONETTE VONLEH: Not really. I mean, I think I could have just been more aggressive and posted up in better spots to keep getting the ball.

But they weren't doing anything special.

Q. Sarah, we were in the locker room, Bella, Buggs everybody was talking about how much you influenced them and had an impact on them. What have the younger Bears on this team meant to you?

SARAH ANDREWS: They mean a lot. To think about that I've basically watched them grow up from freshmen to juniors to now it's really time for them to become seniors and be the leader of the pack, they were great when they came in.

Each game they surprised me, because when they were freshmen I felt like they were sophomores. Just got better each and every year. Just to watch this group grow up, I know they're going to hold this Baylor name well across their chest next year.

Q. Sarah, you told me yesterday you expected this



game to be a dogfight. Was that kind of the slugfest you expected, and could you have done anything different at this point?

SARAH ANDREWS: That's exactly what I expected. Both teams fighting to go to the Sweet 16. The refs was going to let us play. You got to play through some of the fouls they don't call and know that the adversity hits. Even when we got some fouls we thought weren't fouls, and we got some fouls, too. Just knowing it was a game to go to the Sweet 16 and that's what it was about.

Q. And then Netty, Nicki mentioned your growth over the second half of the season. Is this kind of what you expected when you came here, this kind of play and this All-American level performances?

AARONETTE VONLEH: Yeah, I mean, that was definitely goals I had set for myself starting the season, just wanting to be as dominant as possible. Do I wish I could have started playing a little bit better earlier? Yes.

My main focus this last month was just to keep building, just keep working, and just keep, you know, excelling off every game.

Q. Sarah, after a couple of tough games here at home, shooting-wise anyway, how good did it feel just to make one? And then you and Jada, the way that ya'll answered there in the last couple minutes to keep tying up the game.

SARAH ANDREWS: That's what it's about. You never stop shooting. The moment is never too big. You never know. We got great players on our team. It was about still taking those shots when the opportunities came. If you turn it down you never know if you're going to make it.

I think it's about us staying confident knowing the ball was going to go in. We're shooters. We shoot every day at the end of practice. So knowing the ball was going to go in sooner or later.

Q. Sarah, just talking about the senior group as a whole, what have they meant to you having so many seniors leaving the program after this year?

SARAH ANDREWS: They meant a lot. I think first of all, Netty coming here and believing in us and wanting to play with me. I was one of the first people that talked to her. Just her coming here and wanting to play with me so was huge to me.

I knew she was going to finish having a post like that. I knew we would be great together go. Then Jada, her

coming here was a great addition. I think we had a good back court. I think we're one of the best back courts in the country.

And then you add Yaya, and she got better throughout the season in just accepting her role. I think she could have went anywhere in the country she wanted and started, but she came here because she wanted to win. Aliyah coming here being a few months with us, we embraced her and she embraced us.

I think he body, when you look at it, even Madison all the way to -- Jana was supposed to be with this senior group. This senior group was amazing, and you wouldn't want to do it with nobody else.

Q. Sarah, Coach Yo also talked about what a great game she thought it was. Mentioned a couple times you may have stared her down after hitting a bucket and she loves that kind of stuff. I know you're disappointed now, but what's the appreciation level on a game like this and this stage when you put out a product like that?

SARAH ANDREWS: I live for games like this. I love dogfights. It's great for women's basketball and a great game for TV. It wasn't a stare-down. I think it was just the moment of the game. When you're in the moment like that and you see the ball go in, I'm going to bring some energy.

Not too many times I react like that, but it was just a fun game for me knowing it was the last one in Foster. I was just excited to play basketball.

Q. Sarah, as you leave Baylor behind for next steps, do you see yourself trying to play or maybe even be a coach? Has that crossed your mind?

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah, I do for sure want to keep playing. When it's all said and done I do want to be a coach one day. I might come back to Baylor. I got to start with the little kids first, get some experience under my belt, and then work my way up.

College maybe in the back of my mind when it come to coaching. I don't know yet.

Q. Netty, can you talk about the Baylor experience and how special this group was, you coming in this year? What was it like overall?

AARONETTE VONLEH: I mean, with this being my third school, like I can just confidently say that this has been like the most family dynamic I've ever been a part of.

It was just really special to be able to come every day and just be around people that truly like love and appreciate you and want to pour into you and you can pour into them.

It's just been more than I ever imagined it would be. My coaches are just an elite group of coaches, and how far they were able to bring us, I'm just really happy that we were playing under them.

So I'm very glad that I chose to come here and I wouldn't change it for the world.

Q. Nicki, the way the fourth quarter went, back and forth, they jumped out there with six points, was there anything ya'll could have done differently defensively in that fourth quarter?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I mean, I thought we started the quarter getting them to take shots we wanted and not finishing with rebounds.

And so I thought that impacted us early.

You know, we missed some ball screen assignments, but there were key points. We ball-side helped off of Deans, and she was the one kid we were not going to help off of.

You know, and so I thought we made some mistakes that were not what we were supposed to be doing. There is game slippage and these are young people.

I thought we allowed Scott to get comfortable, settle into her pullup. Obviously she made the shot of the day in the tie game to take the two point lead there with under a minute.

But we were supposed to trap that; we didn't. So we missed some defensive assignments. I also think they made plays, you know.

I thought Thienou is probably, to me until the fourth quarter had the biggest impact. Her length, ability to stretch out and get to the rim, you know, I just thought she was really solid for them.

She got Yaya in foul trouble. You know, Yaya's fourth foul was a missed box out. You know, not on her. But I just think we had some key plays where we missed assignments.

Q. Nicki, what does a season like this do for overall support of the program? Bella talked about that in the locker room. Just looking up and seeing all the fans in the stands. Do you think the back-to-back round of 32 appearances really aid in that?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah. I mean, obviously last year we were playing in the Sweet 16 and I felt like this group of -- that first team had a bunch of pros on it and we were just really, really talented.

I think this team was just fun to coach. You know, seeing Netty blossom down the stretch of the season; even today seeing Sarah bounce back and hit her little step-back side-dribble three.

When she missed the three before halftime I'm like, oh, no. That's vintage Sarah. You give her that shot going into halftime -- and I knew we were going to have to manufacture points tonight. That's a really good defense and their length bothers people.

But I think when I was begging for fans early in the season because I thought they were missing out, they were missing out on the opportunity to cheer on an elite group of players, but an elite group of humans that really, really compete for the name on the front of their jersey.

I was mad at Yaya for crying after she missed the three because I didn't think they -- I thought they called the timeout before the foul. She had to say, Coach, I fouled out. I'm like, no, you didn't.

You know, because I didn't want her to be sad yet. I just -- and I just think that we play a fun style of basketball. When the ball moves around and you see Jada attacking and you see Sarah hitting threes and you see Buggs doing her things, I don't think people realize what we lost when we lost Buggs.

I mean, she was a first-team all-league player that led us in scoring and rebounding when she went out. She took that hard because she was back, but till wasn't vintage Buggs. She had her moments, but she had a cap of 20 minutes. So I'm like, got to get her out, got to get her out. I don't ever worry about getting Buggs out.

So, yeah, I am just grateful that down the stretch when it mattered the most that the community really got behind us and cheered this team on. Because I think they played really hard and they played really hard for the name on the front of their jerseys.

Q. Coach, you talked about how much Sarah means to you. Touch on it again. And what's the first memory that pops up when you think of her?

NICKI COLLEN: Okay, so true story. I don't know who Sarah Andrews is. When I took this job I had seen a roster, but Paul Bradshaw when he went over that roster

with me on that interview did not put who was in a boot and who was in a sling and who was coming back from a knee surgery.

I came for my press conference and found out Sarah had had labrum surgery and Queen was in a knee brace, and Jaden was in a boot. They had all had these postseason procedures.

So my first memory of Sarah was in a sling. I had had a coaching colleague that knows me pretty well tell me, I don't think Sarah Andrews is your kind of point guard.

And I think it probably wasn't until August when she was starting to get to do more that I thought, you have no idea what I like if you think I don't like Sarah Andrews.

Before Sarah's foot problem, problems plural, like you could get that every night, like the burst. She just lost her burst that she had.

And I think that this year was a really special year for her because what she learned in year five was how to play and be effective with the limitations she had. I think last year she was still trying to be what I always refer to as Sophomore Sarah. She was trying to be that last year and physically couldn't do the things she had done.

I think she learned. She learned to lead. I think she learned that she could be that person that got the ball to Netty and was effective.

I think she could be an elite defender of certain types of players and keep us in games, like she did against Grand Canyon taking the three away. Sarah has been a pain in my rear, but in the best possible way. I know she loves me and she knows I love her.

But I think sometimes, you know, I mean, she's a little frisky. I always joked with her that I knew we would have true maturity when she was mad at me that she would walk in my office and not post, tweet and post stories on her DM and I would be like, oh, Sarah is mad at me again.

Call her in, we would talk about it, move on. Like to just -- so she got a lot better at that in year five. We made some progress.

Q. Coach, do you feel like this year you kind of put your fingerprints on Baylor as a program more than any other past years? I think more returners than newcomers and Sarah was the only person you didn't recruit here. Do you feel more engrained in Baylor after a year like this?

NICKI COLLEN: Hmm? No. I mean, I think that that first year -- I mean, we turned the roster over in a year, because you have to. Like it's just -- this is the day and age of -- that was a senior group we returned Jaden and Sarah from that first year's team really. Losing Jordan and Queen and Lyss; we had Caitlin.

But I just -- I've embraced every team and tried to make it mine, but also theirs. Like I think that's the thinking about coaching that I get the most pleasure out of, is figuring out the dynamic of each team and putting them in actions that they can be successful in.

And it's really funny, because people refer to Baylor -- like you hear all the time on the women's side that Notre Dame is guard you because they had Arike and Skylar and now Hidalgo and Miles. But Baylor, when Coach Mulke was here was very post-U. Like they were in on the top recruiting class post kids every single year because they played through the post, didn't shoot a lot threes, all of that.

And so it was amazing how quickly people were like, Nicki doesn't know how to coach a post player. I would hear that on the recruiting trail and hear that in people's homes.

I guess I can coach a post player. I mean, Netty is pretty good. I think she had 37 when we needed her to have 37. I think that my joy in the game is figuring out how each team can be great. Each team is different. This year's team won't look the same as next year.

I'm always very, very careful in the locker room to not start talking about next year, because that locker room is about this year. It's about this team. It's about that group that's never going to be in the locker room that way ever again and look exactly like that.

But next year's team is going to look different. Buggs and Bella are going to be different. We're obviously going to have to go out and get in the portal like everybody else in the country. Everybody's rosters are veteran except for maybe Iowa State. You look around the country, how many seniors?

I was watching a game and their average starting lineup age was like 23 years old. That's how it is right now. So I think every year my imprint that we're going to play hard, going to take what the defense gives us, play to our best matchups, we're going to play hard, and we're going to have some fun.

Like I was really calm today. You know, I just felt like this team, that environment, they needed me to be calm, down to the last play. I'm like, Bella, you're going to attack; Yaya, hit this three. She was a little excited about shooting

that three, so...

But, yeah, I mean, I don't -- I think I've had my imprint on this program since the minute I got to Baylor. I'm not trying to be anybody but me. I would fail miserably if I tried. So I'm going to have too long winded answers. I'm not going to say we just have to rebound. I'm going to tell you what scheme we used. Tell you what we need to do better. I'm going to give away the game plan.

Because if any coach is worth what they're being paid in today's environment, they're going to scout and know what they need to do. So I just -- that's me. Like I'm going to say too much, wear my emotions on my sleeve. I'm going to love these kids. I'm just going to do my best day in and day out to be a good representative of Baylor.

We're different. We're really, really different at Baylor. Sometimes I have to watch my tongue. Julianna knows that. I came from a league where you didn't have to hold your tongue. So I'm not up here talking about the officiating or the six fouls called in the entire second half. You know, like I'm not talking about that. (Smiling.)

Q. I wanted to ask about Netty as well. What was it like to coach her? Coming into this year seemed like she was the piece that you needed, and for the last month she really played like it. What did she add both as a player and person to this group?

NICKI COLLEN: The unique challenge of the portal is it takes time for every kid to acclimate. It just does. I mean, even Hailey Van Lith who's playing out of her mind right now played better in February than she did in November for TCU. The confidence just grew and grew and grew.

I think Netty has -- the thing about Netty that's so infuriating and at the same time so special is she has no idea how good she is. If she believed in herself half as much as the people around her believe in her, she would be an All-American.

Like she has elite hands, elite feet, she can jump, she can dunk, she can block shots. I mean, when she makes up her mind to do something, no one can stop her. It's just her making up her mind that's what she wants to do every possession.

She had to find her way. Like not every human being, not every women's basketball player is built to dominate, built like have that mindset. You know, like you hear it but you hear it less now.

Anyone who knows me knows that from the age that my parents put me in my first competitive sport I hated to lose.

Like I was a sore loser for a really long time, because I just hate it that much. And then in high school I had to learn really quickly that if I smiled ran the ball and handed it to the officials and flashed my dimples at them I had a better chance it get a call the next time than if I blew them up and got mad all the time.

But I had to grow that way. I had to grow in my handling of my competitiveness and how that comes out. You know, like a lot of people don't understand how competitive I am because I can walk into a room and be a humble loser, and I appreciate what Ole Miss did today and how hard they played and the plays they made.

But Netty is just elite, and if she continues to play that way she's going to make a lot of money playing this sport. I hope that she falls in love with it because you can't make people fall in love with the work. You can't make them fall in love with the game. Some of these kids are just good at basketball or they're -- but if she decides to love it, I mean, I would draft her. I've been in those draft rooms. I would draft her.

Like I think she has a chance to get a lot better. Like I wish I had her longer. I just wish I had her longer because if I had her another year, a wrap.

Q. Coach, you talked about how next year Bella and Buggs are going to be different. What do you want them to take from the senior class and the season?

NICKI COLLEN: I don't know if it's -- I think both of them found their voice. Buggs has been a captain for two years. She was a captain as a sophomore.

This team needed Buggs' voices, her energy. So I don't think it's about necessarily the seniors. I think it's about wanting to leave her legacy and to take this program further than it's been since she's been here.

So to me, when I look at those two kids that were apart of our first recruiting class, it's more about what are you going to do to help us sign teammates? What are you going to do to improve your ball handling so we turn the ball over less?

Because I think they can both be elite with their versatility. But we got to cut down on turnovers. You know, Bella this year struggled from the foul line. She's too athletic and capable of getting to the foul line to not like own the line. And she's a good enough shooter.

So I think it's to me more about they know what we want. They know what the expectations are. They know what to expect. They knew what to expect in practice more than

most of our seniors and our new guys. So it's about them owning the leadership role. It's about them wanting to be in the gym and getting others in the gym with them.

You know, like I think that's the big part, is they -- Sarah knew -- when I think about our senior class it was such like a variety. Sarah is the only one that knew all the time what I wanted and can read between the lines, you know. Jada I was still teaching what I wanted. Sarah could look at me and go, I know. Like she knew before I said it whether that was a good decision or not.

And so I think it's that for those two. It's just owning the leadership but also like coming into being more of a -- I mean, Buggs was first-team all-conference, but I think Bella can grow and be up for first-team all-conference player next year.

Q. Coach, I wanted to take you back to the game. You played very physical teams back to back. Only one day of rest. Do you think that played a factor in today?

NICKI COLLEN: It probably helped them that they subbed more in their first game. There is no question. Sarah and Jada played a lot of minutes in both games.

But we were able to play three games in three days and then play a lot of minutes last weekend.

So I think when you get to that point, they're young, they still have young legs. They don't think they do, but I think the adrenaline, what you're playing for, what the opportunity in front of you is, Sarah didn't look like she had tired legs on her late finish that should've been an and-one.

She didn't look tired there to me. Jada made plays late. She made her pullup late. I think Netty got banged on. They were hitting her hard. There was a lot of reaching going on late.

But, you know, I mean, I think our league -- everyone is going to talk about the physicality of the SEC, but whether or not you look at the Crooks and the Lees and the Sedonas and the gauntlet that we went through, the Big XII was not a finesse league this year.

And because of that, is Utah more finesse? Yes. West Virginia isn't finesse. So I think from that perspective, I just really we missed a three. We missed wide open three.

But no, I think we made some schematic decisions wrong and I think we missed some shots. You know, and they shot ten more free throws than us.

We fouled them at the end, too. It would've been close.

We purposely fouled them at the end. And I love Tim Green, so it's not like -- and he warned me in the first game. But anyway, thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

