

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Green Bay vs Tennessee

Friday, March 22, 2024

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

Tennessee Lady Volunteers

Coach Kellie Harper

Rickeya Jackson

Jewel Spear

Media Conference



Q. Rickea, Coach Harper is probably going to get a lot of attention here this week. What do you think it means for her to be coaching at her alma mater?

RICKEA JACKSON: I think it means a lot to come back to a place where you kind of started. I'm just proud of where she is now, and her being a coach at Tennessee just means everything to us. I'm just grateful what her journey was and she's here now.

Q. Obviously last time we saw on you the court it was a heartbreaking loss. What have the past couple of weeks been like responding to that? And how did the team come together in that tough moment?

JEWEL SPEAR: I would say that it was a tough game, but our focus is on this current game, Green Bay. And we've been preparing for them this whole week. We feel prepared going into the game, confident. And mentally we feel really great going into the game as well.

Q. Tennessee is now, a record 42 straight tournament appearances. Only school to have that. What does it mean to you to be a part of that legacy?

RICKEA JACKSON: It means a lot to be a part of that history, especially being the only school to have done it. I'm just grateful that we were able to extend the streak. I feel we're going to go on forever, honestly, given the Lady Vol rich history. Cool to be part of it.

JEWEL SPEAR: I agree with Kea. I'd say it's a historic program. A lot of greats before us. And we're just continuing the success here.

Q. Jewel, you're familiar with ACC territory here. What's it like to be back in this neck of the woods. And what are your memories of Reynolds?

JEWEL SPEAR: I am pretty familiar with this area, playing here. My first three years in this stadium against them. But it's always loud in here. We know our fans are going to come support us. So it's going to be a great environment.

But first we have to take care of the first game to even move on to the second game. So all of our focus right now is with Green Bay. I also have like a lot of family in this area as well, and the North Carolina area. Excited to see them come out as well.

Q. Did you have any big games here or anything of note? I know Wake generally plays here every year?

JEWEL SPEAR: I honestly don't remember. I don't remember, like, stat-wise or anything. But, like I said, it's a great environment here. Excited for that again.

Q. Jewel, last year, when had you that great run, and reflecting on this past year and taking the move to Tennessee, and now this year getting to be part of the NCAA Tournament, is there anything that kind of surprised you about this journey or what's stood out to you over this past year?

JEWEL SPEAR: I wouldn't say surprised me, coming to Tennessee, I wanted to be on the big stage, and 42 straight NCAA Tournaments kind of speaks for itself. Just being a part of this history, great players.

Wanted to come here and play with Rickea, great player. Role model for me really on and off the court. That's helped me in so many ways. Really just excited for this moment and just taking it all in.

Q. We talked about how you managed all 42. How do you deal with the pressure of that? This is one of the few programs where a Sweet 16 can maybe feel like a let-down. How do you deal with that reputation and putting your head down to win?



RICKEA JACKSON: I feel like we just have to take it day by day. We never look ahead of our opponent. We know each opponent in front of us day is the main focus. I feel we've been doing just that.

That kind of calms the pressure down for us because it's not like, oh, we've got to beat this team; we've got this team next. It's, let's just focus on what's on our plate right now, not make our plates too big. I feel like that helps a lot.

JEWEL SPEAR: Same thing as Kea said, just taking it game by game because, like we both said, you can't move on to the next round until you win the first round.

Q. Rickea, a year ago you were playing in your first NCAA Tournament. You knew you had another year, you wanted to take it. Obviously you don't anymore. You've got big things ahead of you, obviously, coming for you in the WNBA. How do you keep yourself focused on the task at hand and sort of not looking ahead and sort of focusing on what's right in front of you right now?

RICKEA JACKSON: Just knowing what our bigger goal is as a team. We just want to win. You lose one game, your season is over. That's just enough motivation for us. I feel like we come in and practice each and every day like it's our last. That helps a lot.

And just looking at these ladies, knowing I don't want to let them down and they've got my back and I've got their back. It just speaks for itself, and we just go hard for each other.

KELLIE HARPER: We're excited. March Madness time. It's been fun to watch games both on the women's side and the men's side the last couple days. Really thrilled to be a part of it, and look forward to the opportunity ahead of us.

Q. Do you feel like you're a little bit on an episode of the game show, like, "This is Your Life" with this bracket? What did you think when you saw kind of the group that was going to be here in Raleigh, and what does it mean to be back here?

KELLIE HARPER: I've actually not been back to Raleigh in 11 years. Obviously the coliseum looks different. It looks amazing. Just being back, brings back a lot of memories, a lot of great people, some really good times. That's always fun.

We knew numerically that it was a possibility prior to the Selection Show. It's the NCAA Tournament. It's just part of the excitement, traveling and going back, going

somewhere new, it's always fun.

Q. Coming back into Reynolds Coliseum you led the Wolfpack women's program for a number of years. What did you think about the seeding? Is this a place I wanted to come back to or whatever?

KELLIE HARPER: I don't know that any coach -- I'm not sure there's any coach that's ever going to sit in a press conference and say, I like our draw. No coach is ever going to say that.

We know we've got a tough opponent in Wisconsin-Green Bay, and we know we're in an exciting coliseum here at Reynolds. I know there will be fans in the stands. We hope several of them have on orange. But it should be a great environment and great basketball.

Q. After the All-American teams came out this week Jasmine Powell posted that Rickea Jackson is your guys' Michael Jordan. Can you get your thoughts on that?

KELLIE HARPER: I get it. Everybody has their opinion. Our opinion is, she's an All-American. I think she's one of the best 10 players in the country, I do. But she's got a pretty level head. She gets it, and we're proud of her, who she is and what she's done for us.

Q. With the ups and downs of the season, what do you think this team has learned about handling the emotions of the game and what a potential tournament run, with such high highs and maybe low lows, what do you think they've learned about handling the emotions of this game that will help them with this tournament?

KELLIE HARPER: I think we've had adversity and I think we've handled it at times. I think at times we did not handle it as well as we wanted to. And I think we grew. I think there was a lot of growth during our season. I think our team has stayed pretty steady. And I think that's been one of our strengths.

I think we do keep our emotions in check pretty well in our last month or so of games. I think that's helped us because, I'll tell you what, there's been a lot of big games, a lot of high emotion in those games. And I think us being able to stay consistent and stay steady has been good for our team.

Q. When you were a player at Tennessee did you ever envision you'd be coaching the team or was that ever a goal of yours?

KELLIE HARPER: No. No, I think as a player at Tennessee, at one point I realized I wanted to coach college basketball. I didn't know what that would look like, but I sure did not think it would be at the University of Tennessee.

I'll tell you why, Pat Summitt was the coach at Tennessee. And for us she's this being that is always going to be there. You never thought that anyone else would coach at Tennessee. You just didn't feel like that was an option.

So it really wasn't anything that crossed my mind as a realistic goal when I was a player.

Q. Obviously it was such a heartbreaking loss in the SEC Tournament. What have the last 10 days looked like? Was there time off? Have you learned anything from how your team has responded from that?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, we had some time off. It was an excruciating loss. It was very heartbreaking the way that the game was played out and finished. So it was pretty difficult for each player and staff member, to be honest with you, to recover. We had some time off and I think it was really good for us.

Also corresponded with their spring break. So they really were able to rest, recuperate, and we got back in the gym. And I thought they had really good energy, really good focus and had really good bounce-back.

Then after the draw, we've been a little bit more specific in our practices and who we're focusing on now. I've liked how they came to practice each day, and I like their focus and their -- putting their energy towards this game.

Q. Looking ahead to the game, were you familiar with Green Bay at all and their program? What are you expecting tomorrow?

KELLIE HARPER: I've actually been kind of a fan of Green Bay the last several years. I've been able to watch them multiple times except for this year. This is the one year I didn't get to watch them play throughout the season.

But very familiar with their style of play, their brand of basketball, and how well they play together on the court and how tough they are.

I've always enjoyed watching them play, and I understand what we're facing. It's a really tough team, a team that executes at an elite level. You can pull up stats and see that. And we know it's a team that knows how to win. I think that's also a big statement about that basketball club.

Q. Obviously you and Wes have a lot of connections as coaches not only at major-level programs but at those mid-majors, teams like Chattanooga, Tennessee and Green Bay, the Southwest Missouri, et cetera. Do you go into the mindset differently as a coach or you have different expectations or challenges with entering the tournament coaching those level of teams?

KELLIE HARPER: I think there's a different feel, there's a different vibe. When you come in -- I know from my time with Wes at Chattanooga, and at Western Carolina and Missouri State, you go into this tournament and it's me against the world, us against the world.

You feel like you have a chip on your shoulder when you walk into the tournament. And I think you're just out to prove that you're just as good and that you can do this and the world needs to respect you as well.

So all those feelings and all those emotions, I've been there, I know exactly what those teams feel when they step out on the court.

Q. Yesterday, Sara used the term "determined" to talk about this team since the SEC Tournament. Have you seen a deeper level of that in response from the SEC Tournament in going into this?

KELLIE HARPER: Like I said, I think our level of focus has been really good. I think they've been on top of things. Just even observing body language in our film sessions, they're pretty locked in.

As a coach, you hope that translates to the game when it's time to play because they really have done everything right this week.

Q. Wondering if there's any fond memories that stick out from your time at NC State?

KELLIE HARPER: I was trying to figure out where my office used to be located. I think it was right over here. I think getting here is when you start remembering some of those things and just some of the -- it's not the big moments. It's all those little moments you start remembering, like there's a stairwell over there that's about as hot as anywhere in Raleigh. I walked by and I go, oh, that's it. That's that stairwell.

It's just the little moments. But I think the people. There's still several people around that I've seen, and just some very genuine, great human beings that I got to spend some time with here. It's some fond memories.

Q. You mentioned earlier about the changes here at



the coliseum, and obviously haven't been in a game day yet under the new look. But what did impress -- what struck you when you saw the changes?

KELLIE HARPER: I had seen the plans. I had seen photographs, but I had not actually seen the court and how it's been rearranged.

I think it looks great. I think that's the first thing, you walk in and there's an impressive quality to the new design. And I think one of the I think goals was to squeeze it down and make it louder. And that's everything I've heard, that it's going to be loud. I know that's exciting.

But I think the modern twist to Reynolds Coliseum is pretty cool in how it looks, especially in those end zones. I think they look great.

And even down underneath in the lower level, just everything has been modernized and it looks cleaner and sleeker. So I think it looks like an amazing place to play.

Q. Obviously a lot of emotions, a lot of memories. As a coach, how do you kind of embrace the reminiscing while also kind of compartmentalizing it so you can focus on the game that you have?

KELLIE HARPER: Obviously it's fun to walk in and see these things, but when it's time to go out here and practice, when it's time to go out here and play, we're locked in. I don't think it's anything that I personally have to worry about in terms of emotions.

I'm super excited about our basketball team. And I understand people are going to talk about the connection of me being at NC State, but the most important thing right now is our team. And I know that; our team knows that. We've got to be locked in to who we are and what we need to do come game day.

Q. Jewel Spears played a lot in the ACC, transfer. How did her game transfer over from the ACC to the SEC? And she was a great player at Wake Forest and the Wolfpack played against them.

KELLIE HARPER: Jewel has been an outstanding player for us. I think a couple of things off the court, she's been a great voice, a positive leader for us. We have loved that. We needed that. Her teammates and staff all love her. She's just a player that you fall in love with really quickly.

Basketball-wise, it took her some time this season to get comfortable, and comfortable with our system, how we were playing and what she needed to do with this level. She's talked quite a bit about how physical the SEC is and

then learning to be successful in that physical game.

I think she's broadened her game. She's been able to score off the dribble more. Her defense has improved and her ability to rebound has improved. We needed all of those things for her to be her best.

I think she definitely was playing some great basketball late in the season. And I think that's just her confidence and comfort level with who she is on our team.

It's understandable. She played in a system for three years and it was a very specific system. And now you go to a new system and you're learning and finding your fit. But she is a super talented player, and we are so excited she is in orange.

Q. This is your 42nd straight NCAA Tournament appearance. What's that mean? But then also how do you handle the pressure? This is one of the few programs in the country where you make a Sweet 16 and it can sometimes feel like a let-down. How do you deal with both?

KELLIE HARPER: We're excited to keep that streak going. And I see so many great teams, great programs that on a given year may not be in the NCAA Tournament. You don't ever want to take it for granted.

I think it's easy for Tennessee or Tennessee fans or folks connected there to take it for granted because you've been there every year. But it's a big deal. It's a big deal to be in the NCAA Tournament.

And then in terms of the pressure of it, I think for us, just staying in the moment is the most important thing. Our players get it. You come to Tennessee, our coaches get it, you come to Tennessee. It's just different.

The expectations are extremely high each and every year. And there can be pressure there. But it's also what makes Tennessee special and unique. There's support at an elite level for our program.

Our players come here because they want that. They want to achieve all those expectations.

But on the flipside you've got to be able to handle it when it doesn't go that way. And I think staying true to who we are and, like I said, really focusing on the present, enjoying each moment as we go, I think those type things help.

Q. Kellie, earlier in this season you were questioning or wondering how tough this team was. They answered that question to close out February and, of

course, in March. Physically, skill-wise, you can get better in practice. To mentally get tough, that is a different process. How was this team able to evolve from a team you wondered how tough they were to a team who showed you how tough they were?

KELLIE HARPER: Well, they heard it from me a lot throughout the season. We knew we had to grow there. And you're right, a lot of that is the mental growth.

And I think the biggest thing is this team, the individuals wanted to do it. Like, they wanted to give us everything they had. They wanted to do what we were asking them to do.

I think some of them had to learn what that looked like. So film sessions, repeating drills in practice -- it wasn't always about the execution. It was about winning the loose ball. It was about teaching them what toughness was and what it needed to look like. And it's not just the physical, it's the mental. Actually, more so it's the mental.

And the growth there that our team had from November to February was fantastic. They need to be proud of that. I know I'm proud of them for that growth. That's not easy to do.

Like you said, you can get better a lot of times with your execution but in terms of who you are on the court, that's not always easy. And I'm proud of our team.

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