

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

Tennessee Lady Volunteers

Coach Kellie Harper

Media Conference



Tennessee 92, Green Bay 63

KELLIE HARPER: Obviously I'm really proud of our team. We knew that was a tough and highly efficient basketball team that we were playing today in Green Bay. They've had a terrific season. We focused on them all week. We put a lot of time in knowing that we were going to have to guard and go against a really good opponent.

Boy, I don't take this win lightly. I understand that's a big win for us. Excited about how we played, excited about our poise, and glad we're moving on.

Q. What was going so well for you in the lane? Looked like you were able to dominate pretty much at times.

RICKEA JACKSON: I feel like my teammates just found me. I feel like we were very efficient on both ends of the floor, and I feel like we just stayed within our offense, and we just know our plays so where the open person would be, and I feel like we capitalized on their mistakes. So I feel like it was just very good down the stretch for us.

Q. With the quick turnaround preparing for Monday, what's the key to mentally refocusing and getting ready to prepare for whichever team you have to play next?

SARA PUCKETT: I feel like we enjoy this win today, just get some rest. Definitely going to need that. Then like you said, it's a quick turnaround, so we're going to trust our coaches and what they're doing to prepare us for the next game, and now we're on to the next, so we're completely thinking about NC State or Chattanooga.

We're just ready for the next game. We're going to come out hungry just like we did for this game, and we're excited.

Q. That first quarter was really tight, and in the second quarter you were able to really go on a 21-7 run. What clicked? What changed between the first and second quarters?

RICKEA JACKSON: I feel like we just stayed poised. We knew coming in Green Bay was a great efficient offensive team, so we just knew we had to stay within ourselves. I feel like we just started wearing them down on the defensive end. I feel like we were just so connected on the defensive end today and helping each other, talking. We were just doing everything because we knew that they're a great efficient offensive team, and in order to beat them we would have to do that, so I feel like we just clicked tonight on the defensive end.

SARA PUCKETT: I would just say the communication part of it was the big turnaround on the defensive end because that's what got us in sync, and we were just playing for each other.

Q. Talking about this team's ability to become tougher over the course of the season, that is not an easy thing to do, to change a team's mental approach to the game. How did you manage to do that and earn the praise from your head coach who quite frankly was one of the toughest players to ever play at Tennessee?

SARA PUCKETT: I feel like it started off in practices. She pushed us to our limits in practice, and she really wanted us to succeed there because she knew it would transfer over to the game, and she's been through what we've been through, and so we are trusting her in that process, and I feel like she's really got us to where we are today.

RICKEA JACKSON: I just agree. I feel like her saying that we were tough meant a lot because in the beginning of the season we felt like we weren't, and I felt like we've been showing the toughness that we have.

Hearing that from your head coach, it means a lot, and it makes us want to continue to do that for her, so it was just great.



Q. Your offense kept going pretty good, but it looked like the defense is what allowed you to have that stretch. What changed for you?

KELLIE HARPER: You know, I thought, you're right, our offense was pretty consistent throughout the game, but our defense really changed the complexion of the game in that second quarter. We had no deflections in the first quarter, and I think to finish the game, we finished with about 17. We just upped our activity. I thought we upped our intensity a little bit.

We stayed within our system. We didn't change our system too much from first quarter on, but our players were able to find their comfort, be a little bit more aggressive, and make things difficult.

I thought they made some tough shots in the first quarter. I didn't know if they would be able to continue to make those tough shots, and they missed some of them in the second, and I think that was a big difference.

Q. February 28, 2013, last win as head coach of NC State at Reynolds against Virginia. All that's transpired in the 11 years since then, to come back here and get the win today, can you talk about sort of the full-circle moment?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I'll say this: Obviously I had some great time here, loved a lot of the people and enjoyed being here, but a lot has happened for me in 11 years. I have two children now. I've worked at two different institutions, gone to the NCAA Tournament with two other teams. It feels like a lifetime ago, to be quite honest with you.

It's pretty cool to come back here and be able to play here in a historic coliseum, but I don't want it to be all about that because there's so many great stories in women's basketball. I'll be honest with you, bringing Tamari Key here to play in the NCAA Tournament is a great one, too.

Q. Talk a little bit about Jewel Spear's impact in that second quarter. She got really hot and seemed to be everywhere.

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, obviously Jewel was making shots and we kept going to her, kept trying to find her some good looks, and she knocked them down. Obviously at the same time we were getting stops on the defensive end, and that lead just grew. Obviously Jewel was a big part of that.

Q. As far as first round games go, is this about as smooth as you could expect or hope for?

KELLIE HARPER: Listen, we have worked so hard all week. I'm telling you, we did not -- we knew we were playing a good team. I cannot emphasize that enough. So for us to be able to get an easy win, that's a big deal. That is a big deal.

You're watching the NCAA Tournament and you're seeing upsets, and we didn't want to be on that end of it today. Our players were locked in, focused, and they're the ones that made this game go smoothly.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Avery Strickland. Obviously you anticipated a bigger role for her this season, but then those back-to-back concussions really put her back. How good was it to get her in, especially transferring from Pitt, having played there, and then she gets a steal and a basket right after she gets in?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, you know, what Avery brings us, she brings great athleticism, great energy. She plays so hard. She has the ability to get downhill, and she can shoot the three.

Obviously her development has been a little hindered with injuries right when we -- in a tough time. But she's hung in there. I'll tell you, she's practiced hard and continues to improve. It was good to get her some extended minutes there in that fourth quarter.

Q. The difference between the first and second quarter, it looked like it was just an execution issue. The perimeter defense from the first to the second quarter was night and day in terms of pressure. I assume you didn't have to tell your team much, just basically sort of get back to what you had planned to do?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, we made a few minor tweaks, but for the most part, the difference between the first quarter and second quarter, like I said earlier, was our activity on the ball. I thought we were a little bit more aggressive. I thought we contested a little bit better. We talked. We communicated better defensively during that time, as well.

Q. We all know the legacy of the Tennessee program being in every single NCAA big dance. How is the squad that you have right now contributing to the success and legacy of Tennessee?

KELLIE HARPER: Well, I'd like to think we're still writing it. I think this team has been through a lot this year. I think they have grown. I think they have stepped on the court

with class, and I think represented our university and our program really well.

There's a lot of pressure to play at Tennessee. A lot. Not everybody can handle that. Not everybody understands it. Not everybody can do it.

This team has embraced the challenge, and we've asked them for more and more and more, and they hung in there all year, and the result is we're playing our best basketball now. That's what I'm proud of.

Q. How nice is it to see Tamari get on the floor in front of her home crowd after not playing last season?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I think that's a great story, Tamari being able to play here, at home for her, and being effective in the game, as well.

What a great story for her, what she's been through medically and to be able to fight through and come back and help lift this team throughout this season and now in the NCAA Tournament. Just really proud of her. Happy for her.

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