

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Gonzaga vs Ole Miss

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Williams Arena

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach Yolett

McPhee-McCuin

Christeen Iwuala

Cotie McMahon

Media Conference

Q. A lot of this team is new. You guys have only been together for this year, but a lot of you have NCAA Tournament experience at other schools. How does that help you all in getting ready for this tournament even if your experience isn't together?

CHRISTEEN IWUALA: Yeah, I mean, just like you said, it just prepares everybody. I feel like everybody is just ready for this moment. It's not too big of lights for us. I feel like we're all just ready to come together and just be able to play.

Q. Cotie, I talked to some of your old coaches, and the gist was that you're a super competitive person. Where does that type of drive come from and being super competitive? They said it was something that goes beyond college or even a lot of pro players?

COTIE McMAHON: I feel like it's something that I had to kind of build growing up. I grew up with my older brother and my uncle and then my grandfather, so just a lot of men in my household. Being the only female, I kind of had to fight my way for a lot of things, and they never kind of gave anything to me easy. So I always had to work for it.

Then me being the only female, I always wanted to be the best at it, and I feel like it just means more being the only female growing up. Honestly, I just carry that on into life, and then it's just something that I kind of just developed and never got rid of, honestly.

Q. Cotie, I was going to ask you about your decision



to transfer and what it was about Ole Miss that felt right to you.

COTIE McMAHON: Yeah, honestly, I just think how my whole recruiting process kind of fell into place when I did enter the portal. I feel like just Coach Yo's intentions always felt the purest. Honestly, we went through a lot of ups and downs before I finally committed here, and she really stuck it out with me, so I think that was the biggest sign within itself that she always had my best interest.

Q. Very rarely do Minnesota fans see an all-Black team play here if you're not an HBCU, also being coached by a Black female. Can you speak on the fact that you'll be showing people how to play and how important that is to show that and also playing for a Black female coach?

CHRISTEEN IWUALA: Yeah, Coach Yo always talks about how people just can't be what they can't see. It's an honor for, I think, all of us to be able to show that and be a preparation of that, and I feel like whenever we all do come out and compete, I feel like they're going to be able to take a lot of gems of what we're able to do, so I'm honored to be able to do that.

COTIE McMAHON: What she said.

Q. Cotie, has it been what you expected, getting to Ole Miss when you went through the recruiting and transferred and everything? Has it been different than what you thought or the same?

COTIE McMAHON: No, honestly, I really did not expect much. Me and Coach Yo had a lot of conversations about what we both wanted from each other, to not only be successful within the season but also just in life in general. I feel like everything that we've talked about and everything that we kind of promised each other is everything that we're accomplishing, and it's all just falling into place. I would say it's everything I expected.

Q. Do you feel like you've developed over the season above even beyond what you were before you got here?



COTIE McMAHON: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that was one of the biggest reasons why I did want to enter the portal, to just expand my game and just learn and develop. I feel like I've developed into a whole different position. So yeah, I would definitely say my game has expanded how I wanted it to, and I've developed and learned a lot more than I kind of expected to learn.

Q. Christeen, you were on Team 50. Is there a different feeling with Team 51 or is it the same? How does it compare?

CHRISTEEN IWUALA: Yeah, for sure. I feel like just with the new group of people, it's been a really different role for me to just be able to show them kind of like what to do, how to do it and stuff. So just my role in general has been different, and then that feeling has just allowed me to come closer to everybody else. I feel like everybody on this team is just so much -- they enjoy being around each other so much.

Q. Cotie, a lot of people after this season imagine the next step for you will be the WNBA. I was curious if you had any thoughts on them getting their CBA agreed to yesterday and what that could mean for your future?

COTIE McMAHON: I mean, it's great to know that things are finalized and stuff like that and to know that everything is on track how it was supposed to be. But at the same time, I'm just being where my feet are, and all that stuff will come when the time is right.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Just incredibly grateful to be here in Minnesota. Had to really work on pronouncing that word. I used to struggle saying it coming up, and I've been practicing since we found out that we were come here. Really proud of myself for pronouncing it the right way, to start.

This is just a great opportunity for our team. This is a brand-new season. We are grateful to be here, and we are excited about what's to come, Gonzaga being what's next.

I have a lot of respect for Lisa. We go way, way, way back when I was an assistant at Portland, and we were in the original WCC. Just been in contact. I consider her in the coaching community a friend, and I look forward to us competing against each other tomorrow.

Q. This team has a lot of players that are here for their first year with Ole Miss but they maybe have tournament experience elsewhere. How does that help you bring this all together and try to go on a run here?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, that's a great question, and way to represent. I thought about that because I was thinking about Gonzaga's makeup and then our makeup. In the Southeastern Conference, we don't get an opportunity to really be young. We have to stay old if we want to compete at a high level.

When we put this team together, we didn't only want to acquire talent, but we wanted to have experience. So when I was going through the roster, our roster, I thought about how many have experienced the NCAA Tournament and then how many have experienced Sweet 16s, Elite Eights, and we have a good amount. Even when I put my staff together, same thing. I've got a coach that coached in the championship game. I have two assistant coaches that played in the Elite Eight. Then you have myself.

A lot of experience with our team that I hope pushes us through this moment.

Q. You are one of 12 Black coaches that have teams in the NCAA. I asked your players this and I'm asking you this. Very few teams come here to play with an all-Black team unless you're an HBCU. How important is that for fans to see you as a coach and see your players play in an environment like this?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, you guys are cooking with these questions. I think representation matters. I always tell everybody that when I get a chance, you can't be what you can't see. I don't think that -- when we show up tomorrow in this space, we show up as ourselves, and my hope is that we inspire not only young Black girls but white girls and any race because what we want to represent is excellence, at the end of the day.

I don't shy away -- I'm not one of those that says I don't see color. I do see color because I am proud of the skin I'm in. But I hope that we get to inspire people with how we play from all walks of life, young, old, Black, white, it doesn't matter. But I did not know that, so I don't know much about Minnesota, honestly. Have I been here? I think the Final Four was here before, so maybe I've been here one time. But I'm not very familiar with the history behind it. But now that you say that, that's something that gives me a lot of pride.

But you know what gives me the most pride? My daughters are here. One is 13 and one is eight. They get to see basketball played at a high level, and they get to see leadership, and we get to normalize that.

My mom was a principal for 30 years. All I know is Black excellence. My dad is a Hall-of-Fame coach. For me, it's



par for the course.

But I do understand that this may be the first time, and I hope that we don't let these people down.

Q. I know you said on Selection Sunday you woke up and you still get butterflies. This is your fifth state NCAA Tournament. Does anything feel any different to you? Is it still the same?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, we're ready to play somebody, anybody. I woke up again this morning incredibly just pumped up, like oh, God, I want to play someone. I'm sick of watching film.

I was kind of bummed when I saw we were matching up with the Zags because I'm familiar with them, and I think what I love about March Madness is you get to play someone you haven't played before. It just gives, like, an excitement.

But they are a new team, and they're different. I just am very familiar with Gonzaga and Minnesota because of the coaches. Green Bay, not so much.

But nevertheless, grateful and really excited to compete.

Q. Can you give people who maybe don't know about your team word for this year, "give," can you let them know what that means to you and your team?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, every year I pick a word for the team. I kind of let it organically come to me. This year's word is "give." I think in the environment we're in, these young people receive so much, and there's nothing wrong with it, but that's really not how the world usually works.

Most times, the people that do receive in life are givers. At least that's how I was raised. I don't want them to miss that opportunity to understand that, while they do take a lot and receive a lot, that it's important for them to remember that they should give. Usually during tournament times, that's all I put on the board for my messaging, SEC play, give, and I circled it. Now I'm going to put that there and circle it because it's important that they give all that they can so that when they go out in the world and become citizens outside of the sport, they understand how important it is for them to give back.

Q. Cotie said she had some ups and downs being in the portal, that the experience was a little bit up and down, but she said she appreciated you having her back and your intentions and kind of what led her to pick Ole Miss. What was the perspective of talking to

her and bringing her in?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Cotie has been great. I just think she really caught me at a great time in my career. I'm a little bit more piped down. I thought I was a firecracker when I first came in. I thought it was important for everybody to know that I've arrived, especially after getting my head beat in the first two years.

Now I don't feel that way. This is our fifth NCAA Tournament in a row, fifth 20-win season. Unless you're under a rock, you kind of know what I'm about and what my program is about. So Cotie was able to get more of a balanced individual. I always try to give a shout-out to my therapist, kind of worked those things through.

I think my purpose in life now is to be an example for my players. So it's not so much about me anymore, it's about them and making sure that they get a chance to see the right way.

Cotie is genuine and just a great individual that just really needed guidance. I'm just really grateful that I'm the one that has been gifted that task to mentor her in that space.

Q. You referenced the youth of Gonzaga versus your experience, and Gonzaga has a freshman that was all-conference Player of the Year, Lauren Whittaker. Talk about her and what you think about her.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, Lauren Whittaker is a beast. Will just watching her play, I just love how Lisa uses her. I love what she's able to do, from shooting the three -- she's a three-level scorer.

We don't necessarily have a post player like that in our league, so we're going to have to kind of when she's on the perimeter treat her like a guard, and when she's inside, we've got to try to do what we can to not allow her to get deep steals.

I'm a basketball fan, so as soon as I started watching film, I'm like, man, this kid is incredible. Looking forward to seeing how we compete against her tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned your staff a little while ago and their postseason experience. Can you talk about them a little bit and the contributions they've made this season to Team 51?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah. You know, first, I just want to talk about -- so I've had changes on my staff, but one thing that has been consistent has been my support staff. They've been with me from the jump, from the athletic trainers to strength coach to my ops, my director of

player engagement. These people have been with me from the jump, and they really are the foundation -- chief of staff has been knowing me forever. They've been with me from the jump.

As far as consistency and making sure that the culture and what this program is about the Ole Miss way is being echoed, it really starts with them first. Then when it gets to my coaches, I tried to get people that adopt the four ins, and they believe in, they buy in, they lock in and they're all in to what the Ole Miss way is about.

I think our coaches do a good job of making sure that they live that and that our players understand that they are committed to that.

They have a lot of experience. They're not new to this environment. Like when I hired Quentin Hillsman, ultimately I want to be a Final Four championship coach, I went and got someone that can do that, who's been there, that can guide me along the way. Just really appreciative for them and their efforts.

But I didn't want to just say my coaches because I have 19 people on staff, and all of them are so important to what we do every single day. Sometimes you just don't see them, but this thing is really moving smoothly, and it's because of them.

Q. You've been one of the most eloquent figures in college basketball, period, on NIL specifically and the opportunity that it presents to women athletes to demonstrate value in the marketplace. I just wonder with that in mind if you could comment briefly on the WNBA's new CBA and what that will mean for recruiting, for players who are interested in pro pipelines, what it changes from your perspective for you and other college coaches.

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Man, gosh, I've been thinking about it. I just made a post just yesterday because I don't think my players understand how monumental that is. I've been a head coach for 13 years now, eight at Ole Miss. When I first started at Ole Miss, I was the lowest paid coach, and rightly so, because I hadn't earned the right to demand more.

As I started to get in this seasoning and show my worth, I had to get to the negotiation table, too, and I can just tell you, it's not easy. It's not easy for women because we don't usually have to do it. We never had to fight for our value and our worth.

So it's an uncomfortable space. But to see the women in the WNBA fight for their value and their worth and get it --

usually in negotiations it's never -- no one is happy. You usually try to get in the middle. But to see them fight for the Coties, for Christeens, for the Sira Thienous, and the ones that are coming behind them and stand 10 toes, as my players would say, down, and just really say, no, we're going to fight for this, it's going to go down in history, and my children will talk about it later and benefit from it.

When I see all of these things, the NIL space, the CBA and all of these things happen, I'm just really proud because it has to start from somewhere. For them to really fight for the players, it just means a lot, and I'll leave you with this: Agnes Berenato, I worked for her at Pitt, and we always had really cool interactions, but one of the interactions she had, I had just got there from Portland, and she brought me and another female coach in the office, and she sat us down, and she said, let me tell you something. You know, she's Italian, and she's like, let me tell you something right now. One day I'm not going to be doing this. She's retired now. She said, but you will need to stand in front and be an advocate for the sport in order for it to grow.

When she said that, I didn't quite understand that, but now that I'm in this space and now that I understand my platform, I know it's important to use it for things that will help move the sport ahead. Like, I'm still a baby in this. You've got Geno, they say he's been there 42 years. I'm 43. Dawn has been at South Carolina 18 years. I've only been here eight. But I do understand that I have a platform, and we do have to fight.

I know what it will do for the people that come behind me. I know what Pat and Vivian Stringer and Geno and all the likes -- and Dawn and people have done for me, and I know what those women just did, I know what it's going to do for the people coming behind them, and I'm grateful for it.

Q. Speaking of that post that you made yesterday, I think you said something about this is my last thing before I get off for the weekend. Was it the SEC tournament --

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah.

Q. Has that been a practice you've done for a while or is that a new thing?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Yeah, so at different times I get off of social media. At different times I'll just get off because sometimes you have to block out the noise. So this is perfect timing for me.

When we went on that little losing streak, I got off completely because I just think that the only people that



matter right now is my family and the people that are around me 24/7. I don't want to hear anything good nor bad. I just really want to lock in.

So yes, I'm off social media so that I can really lock in and focus on the things that matter, and that's my team and my family right now.

Q. Kind of the analysts and public figures putting out their brackets, I know Barack Obama had you guys losing in the Sweet 16 when he put his out yesterday --

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: No way.

Q. Do you take those things personally? Do they matter to you? Or is it this is the spirit of March Madness?

YOLETT McPHEE-McCUIN: Well, two things: One, it's the spirit of March Madness. I didn't see that. I'm disappointed. But also, too, if I can find anything that I can use to piss me off, I kind of try to go with it. That's that MJ theory, like, I took it personal.

If there's something that can get me ramped up, I usually try to use it.

But really, honestly, in this space, I don't need much to get me pumped up to want to compete. We're here to win basketball games. So that is the focus.

But see, that's why I'm off social media, so I don't read stuff like that because sometimes it distracts me, too. I want to respond or something like that. I don't really need to be in that space right now.

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