

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Stephen F. Austin vs Missouri State

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Austin, Texas, USA

Moody Center

Missouri State Bears Coach Beth Cunningham

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We now welcome you back to Austin, Texas to this NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Championship pregame First Four press conference featuring Missouri State. We welcome to the podium Missouri State head coach Beth Cunningham. Coach, congratulations on making this NCAA Championship appearance and on earning the Conference USA Tournament title.

We will now begin by asking you to make an opening statement and then we'll go to questions. Coach?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: It's been a great week for our kids. We started the Conference USA Tournament last Thursday and it's been a little bit of a whirlwind. Beat the third seed, the second seed and then the first seed. Got home Sunday, Sunday evening for the Selection Show and quick turn around as we hopped on the plane yesterday.

It's been an exciting time for our kids, thrilled for them to be here and have the opportunity to play in the NCAA Tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

Q. Coach, you have had a couple days now to kind of scout Stephen F. Austin. What can we expect from them?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, a talented team, very guard-oriented. They love to shoot the three, love the play with tempo. I expect we'll probably see a little more zone than we have seen in a lot of our recent games, although we have seen it throughout the year, but talented team, Bishop does a great job with them.

We have one of our former players, sorry, one of their



former players now playing for us with Angel Scott so that's probably most of my familiarity with them prior to this point, but had a tremendous year and excited for the opportunity.

Q. Coach, it's Missouri State's first NCAA Tournament appearance since the 2021-22 season. How do you feel about continuing, you know, it stopped for a couple of years but you came back in the tournament. How do you feel about that?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I think we've been right on the brink. Two years ago we lost on a last-second shot to Drake for the conference championship with 2.6 seconds left. Felt like we were right there so it feel like that moment's haunted us -- haunted me the last two years just being so close.

Our kids have worked extremely hard. There's obviously a strong tradition and history of success at Missouri State and a history of us playing in the NCAA Tournament. So excited to be able to bring this team here and for these kids to have that opportunity to play in it as well.

Q. Coach, you have been around the game a long time, your days with Notre Dame to your days as a coach and 16 seed is probably a foreign thing for you considering all the success you've had in the past. What's it like to carry that tag? And does it kind of feel familiar to kind of getting a six seed where you feel like maybe it's a little bit not indicative of who your team is?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, at this point not really focused on where they decide to place us. I would say it was a little bit of a surprise. It wasn't really on my radar that we might be playing as soon as Wednesday.

Like I said, that's certainly not our focus. The best thing we could do was to go win the conference championship and put ourselves in a position to be here and that's our entire focus, to prepare like we would for any other game and to hopefully try to earn another game on our schedule.

Q. Coach, are you worried about the fatigue factor with this coming back from the tournament right away



back into the mix of playing again?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Honestly, not really. Maybe initially knowing how quickly it would be it crosses your mind, but how it's played out, it feels like we're kind of in good game flow. You can look at it a couple different ways where oftentimes once you find out who you're playing and when you're playing, you have a whole week to balance getting back into practice, prepping.

But to be honest, we've been in a good game flow. We had Sunday and Monday off, both ended up being travel days so we haven't been able to do anything on the court since the checkup game, but most of the time throughout the year, we've typically had a day off, a one day prep with practice and then a shoot-around on game day so I feel like we're in a good flow right now.

I think our kids would be more excited to play a game than to practice, to be honest, so I think having the last two days, although it was travel, just mentally and physically kind of getting their minds right, getting their bodies rested and then excited to get back out on the court today and play. We'll have plenty of time tomorrow with, obviously, a shoot-around.

I think our kids will be ready to tip it up and they've done a great job, I think, just balancing a really tough schedule at times throughout the year. That doesn't really concern many.

Q. What's your background with Texas and in NCAA Tournament or just playing Texas in this location?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: You want me to answer that or you? I think you're opening that up. No, last time I was here at Texas was in '97 as a player. Jody Conradt was head coach here and I believe we were in a completely different facility. We played on St. Patrick's day so we're not that far off, but we were sixth seed. They were the three seed.

It started our -- it was part of our Cinderella run to the Final Four my senior year. I have a lot of fond memories. That was the only time I had been in Austin and ever had an opportunity to play Texas.

Q. I'm assuming all of your players, it's also their first time in the NCAA Tournament. How do you prep them into feeling like, less overexcitement and ending up not performing well. How do you prepare them mentally into this kind of tournament?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, there's certainly no substitute for experience so the more you can give your

kids an opportunity to have the opportunity to play, the better.

But I'll tell you what pressure was, pressure was having to go into a conference tournament and having to win three straight days against teams that were all seeded ahead of us and have an opportunity to be here in this position.

I think at this point our kids are excited, we're ready to have fun, go out and prepare like we would for any other game. I think more the pressure was probably what they did and how they handled it in the conference tournament, to be honest.

Q. Coach, you coach add lot of different teams over the years. Where would you rank this one as far as rewarding? You go into the year, it's a little topsy-turvy, so many different pieces and players, for it to come the way it did and here you are in Austin, Texas with all the pageantry. One of the most rewarding experiences of your coaching career? Where would you rank this team?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, no question. I think every year every team that you're part of kind of has its own story and so I never really have been into necessarily comparing teams. I think each one takes on its own identity and really has its own story.

I think the thing I've been so proud of with this group, you know, the landscape has changed so drastically the last couple of years. We had our starting five to replace, four due to graduation and one due to a transfer. For our staff to be able to go out and find the piece that is we felt like would help us compete for a championship, I thought our staff did a tremendous job.

Coming into the year, we had seven returners, we had seven newcomers, four of them being freshmen, three transfers that came in.

The challenge nowadays as a coach is you're typically getting a brand new team together in June it seems like these days. So you're trying to accelerate as best you can the learning curve, whether it be young players, whether it be acclimating transfers to a new way of doing things. That really becomes a challenge, but I think the thing I'm most proud of is we've learned and grown throughout the year.

We've learned from successes that we've had. We had some bumps in the road. We had a tough stretch in February in conference and every time our back has been against the wall, we have been at our best. I think that's a lot of credit to our kids, that's credit to their mentality. Just

their willingness to stay together and to trust the process and just continue to do the things that we thought we were going to be able to do to be successful.

I think you have to give credit to the kids. I think that's what winning that conference championship, that's why that championship is so rewarding. It's all the things you overcome to get there. It's not literally that moment, but just kind of the emotion you saw from our kids was really all the emotion of all the individual and collectively team things that you go out through a college season. You get to a point where just for them to have that rewarding feeling and just that thrill of the highest highs.

Q. Coach, you've got some talented upperclassmen. Can you talk about the development of the freshmen and what they've men to you during your run the second half of the season?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, there's no question that our bench and our freshmen are a huge piece to the puzzle and the reason that we're here because certainly we had some experience in our starting group but the way our freshmen have developed, one getting thrown into a starting role once Cady Pauley got hurt.

And then you look at the other freshmen that have come in and really impacted off the bench, it's been critical. We wouldn't be in the position we're in without them. They've grown so much throughout the year. They've been reliable.

I think probably the biggest thing that has been the difference-maker with that group, we thought they were a talented group coming in that could impact us, but just their mentality and just how they approach practice every day, just a very mature group that has -- they just kind of get it. So I think that's been really impressive collectively and individually as a group.

But no question that's a huge reason that we had the success we had in the tournament and the success throughout the season.

Q. Coach, you have one player with Final Four experience, just happens to be Division II your point guard in Maycee, but it's still a pressure cooker of a situation. How much do you think her having that kind of experience on the stage albeit a different division, is going to help with the turnaround and dealing with all this kind of stuff?

BETH CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I think in general just relaying on leadership experience period, wherever it's at. She obviously has a little bit of a different story than maybe

most players in this tournament as she's played junior college, played Division II and comes here for her last year.

Couldn't be more happy for her and the path that she's taken that's put herself in a position to be here and really lead us, but I think just in general relying on just the experience and leadership qualities of our upperclassmen in general is important and has been for us all year.

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