

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Missouri State vs Texas

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Austin, Texas, USA

Moody Center

Texas Longhorns

Coach Vic Schaefer

Rori Harmon

Maddy Booker

Jordan Lee

Media Conference

Q. Rori, how much did that season that you missed due to injury kind of change your perspective on what you wanted to accomplish when you came back?

RORI HARMON: I think when you go through something as traumatic as that where it takes you out of the game for a really long time, you become more grateful about things. You really just want to enjoy the process. I know wins are a lot and very important, wins and losses are very important, but at that moment I just really wanted to come back and enjoy playing with my teammates again. But now obviously I've been back for a couple years now. It kind of feels like a really long time ago when I injured myself. The goal now, especially now this is my last year, is just enjoy like with my teammates and embrace every moment, and obviously win some games along the way.

Q. Rori, what do you think as a team from Justice Carlton as things move forward that you're getting and maybe what you're not getting yet, what she's capable of?

RORI HARMON: We've seen Justice like thrive in so many games. I think she really presents herself as a key to our team. When I can see in her eyes she's locked in, she's ready to go, she really does do really well, can do a lot of good things for us inside the paint. She's growing. She's just a sophomore and getting a lot more playing time this year. So you've got to let these like younger kids like on our team like grow a little bit through the process. I think she's doing really well and I'm glad that she's picking up. This is a really important time for her to do really well right



now, and she is.

Q. Maddy, I don't know if you remember when Duke was recruiting you, I think Beth Cunningham did your home visit. Now she's going to be on the other side tomorrow. What do you remember about that, if anything?

MADDY BOOKER: I mean, that she was a good coach. It was a long time ago honestly. I'm pretty sure like throughout my process that's when she (inaudible,) but I mean that we kind of vibed honestly. Like I talked to her on the phone, talked to her in person too on my visit. But yeah, we vibed and I'm happy that she got a head coaching job here at Missouri State.

Q. The SEC Championship was obviously the last time you guys got to take the court together. What is your biggest emphasis in practice between now and then to kind of keep that edge from that victory?

JORDAN LEE: I would say three of the things that we've kind of been emphasizing throughout the week are rebounds, turnovers and offensive execution. Those three were very pivotal to us throughout the entirety of the SEC tournament and just keys to our success going forward kind of no matter who we're taking the floor against. Kind of maintaining those throughout the practices this week were very important to us.

RORI HARMON: Yeah, just bringing consistency, too. This is a time where you either start falling off or you come together as a team and continue that chemistry that you've had all year. But to add to Jordan, she's right completely but just also like bringing that consistency and energy every day.

Q. Jordan, how is this team do you think maybe different, improved offensively from last year? There have been a few games this year where you had like 10, 11 3s. I know the defenses were playing it that way, but do you think the team is different?

JORDAN LEE: Definitely. I think that alone kind of says it if you're looking at stats, but I think the biggest thing is the

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way people guard us.

I think last year towards this point in the season we had a lot of different things that people try to take us out offensively. We experienced the SEC tournament championship last year, which we had kind of never seen really a defense like that schemed really heavily on Maddy, and I think some of the pieces that we've added this year as well as the consistency that Rori and Justice have brought, it just makes teams guard us a little bit different. You're kind of not able to sag or double the post, which is what we've seen most I would say most of the season either last year and a little bit this year as well.

It definitely just changes the way people guard us. Hopefully that makes it easier for Book, hopefully that makes it easier for Rori. Just adding that consistency from the 3-point line and players who can do a variety of different things on the court together, I think makes it really challenging when you're trying to take away one person or take away our A and B option, and even when we do have that C, it still looks pretty good.

Q. Girls, you guys have been here before, you know this is, for Rori, last run for you. Just how exciting is it to go into this weekend and start what you guys wanted to finish last year? For all of you.

RORI HARMON: Yeah, that definitely like in the back of my head I do think about how it is my last run. I try not to put too much like emotions about like that part, like it being the last. You just want to be in the moment, don't get tied up in too much emotions. Just play like it is like -- like understand I don't have another opportunity to do it, but just want to stay in the moment, be where my feet are at and enjoy my time with my teammates.

I think we're at a really good spot, especially where we ended off with winning the SEC Championship. I'm just really grateful to be in this position and to continue raising the standard for us on our team this March.

MADDY BOOKER: I have nothing to add to that unfortunately.

JORDAN LEE: I definitely think it's super special, especially to have the two home openers here in Austin is a really incredible feeling, and to kind of play in front of the fans who have been fantastic all season. Definitely a great start to March, for sure.

Q. Got one for Rori and the second question is for either Jordan or Madison.

Obviously the WNBA just reached a deal on their CBA

recently. As someone who could potentially be going to the league next year, do you have any thoughts on that?

RORI HARMON: Super grateful. That is amazing. I'm really glad that those players and everyone that was involved for that -- in that like fought for what they wanted and just make it easier for not only them but for us players who do want to play in the league or the next level. That's really great, I'm very happy for that.

Q. And then for Madison and Jordan, you guys have been in this tournament a lot already. Vic obviously has extensive history being here both at Texas and Mississippi State. How much has he talked to you guys about past teams that you guys weren't on and tried to, I guess, instill lessons that he may have learned from those experiences?

MADDY BOOKER: Yeah, I feel like he kind of brings up a lot just about the past teams, him going to the Final Four with Mississippi State years before we were even here at Texas, too.

I just feel like the lesson that we kind of got from his stories and his words were just basically like it's one game at a time, that preparation is key right now and that's why our practices right now are very crucial to how we play in this tournament and how we play like throughout really the whole season, and how crucial it is just for this moment because it's basically like a one and go home game. Just kind of be present where you feet are, don't get too far ahead. You can't get to game 2 without winning game 1. Just really keeping your head straight, just no distractions and just be present where your feet are.

Q. Rori, as someone who has so much experience in this tournament, what do you tell a player like Aaliyah Crump, who obviously has been able to make an impact for you guys this year but this is her first tournament?

RORI HARMON: Yeah, I think to just enjoy the process, this is really fun. What Book said about win or go home. The stakes are really high but not necessarily telling like Crump or the other ones you need to be worried or tied up. It's just a basketball game, keep playing.

At the end of the day, we're going to need everyone on our team. Everyone is very important to our team and our team success. Whatever you can bring, like whenever your number is called, like bring whatever you've got to the table because it's going to be needed.

Q. I covered Ashton Judd when she brought a state championship to West Plains, and I don't know if she's

talked to you about it, her dad's kind of a legend at Missouri State and she grew up rooting for this team. Can you just talk about if she said anything to you and how she's fit in for this season with you?

JORDAN LEE: I can say I did not know about her dad, that's really awesome.

Obviously knowing how much she's meant to the state of Missouri and her being able to do what she did there, hometown kid and then coming here. Like Book has mentioned, she's kind of been instrumental to our team's success and touched on how lucky we are to have a team that's 10 deep and whenever your number does get called, doing the most that you can with those minutes especially at a time like now. That's pretty awesome, I'm super happy for her.

Q. She never told you that?

JORDAN LEE: No, not at all, but I'm sure she's excited. No, that's a lot of history, and obviously probably super proud of her dad as well.

RORI HARMON: She's like the Missouri hometown leader. She tells me a little bit about all that, but I know that she's really grateful to be at the University of Texas just representing and playing against her hometown as well.

MADDY BOOKER: Yeah, we love Ashley here, she's definitely a hard worker. She definitely fits in here, fits the standard. She's definitely a hard worker and we definitely love having her in Texas.

Q. Madison, last night Bears head coach Beth Cunningham had mentioned that she had gone on a visit to you. Can you talk about what you remember about Coach?

MADDY BOOKER: It was obviously a long time ago. I just remember just we kind of really vibed honestly. I've been on their campus too when she was there literally right before she went to Missouri State. Yeah, no, it was a long time ago, but I definitely remember that we vibed for sure.

MODERATOR: We are now joined for today's NCAA Championship first round pregame press conference by University of Texas head coach, Vic Schaefer. Coach, welcome to the podium and congratulations on your season to date and the SEC tournament championship.

VIC SCHAEFER: Thanks, everybody, for being here. It's an exciting time. Obviously super excited about this team. First I want to congratulate Stephen F. Austin for being here, another fellow Texas team, and congratulate them on

their season and winning their conference tournament. Same with Missouri State.

Obviously Missouri State has our full attention. We're really -- I know my kids are ready to play. It's been two weeks. As I've talked about this many times, when you're playing well, you don't want off two weeks. I gave the kids Monday and Tuesday, we came back Wednesday and Thursday and had -- when I walked out of the gym Thursday, I said they've still got that edge, they're still good. We shot and lifted on Friday, took Saturday and then we've gotten back after it on Sunday.

I can tell you, watching us in practice, my kids are ready to play. Just again, so proud of them, what they've been able to accomplish to date against the schedule that they've had has really been quite remarkable. They certainly have my respect and admiration for their ability to navigate it. I'm excited to take them into postseason. It's not Timbuktu, but it's Austin, Texas, and we're excited to be able to host. I know our fans will be great. They'll be excited to be here and support this great event.

Right now we're pretty healthy, pretty happy, and hopefully our best basketball is still in front of us. I've always taken great pride in coaching my teams to continue to get better. We have continued to work hard in practice, we just don't do things lightly, never have. They've continued to work hard and improve.

Excited to be here and have this opportunity. Again, welcome in Virginia Tech and Oregon to town, two great teams. I'm sure they're excited to be here. So we'll worry about Missouri State right now.

Q. I know the committee's only job is to judge by this year, but this Missouri State team has a lot of history behind them. When you look at them, do they look like a 16 seed?

VIC SCHAEFER: No. You have to remember -- you don't know this, Danny, but when I was at the University of Arkansas, we would play them every year. We'd play them home and home every other year. We'd go up there and they'd be hanging from the rafters. It would be packed, and they would beat us 20 and make us like it.

Then they would come down to Fayetteville and they would bring every bus within Missouri, 2,500 fans, and it would be a knock-down drag-out. I mean, they always had a couple, two or three kids from Arkansas that maybe we didn't recruit or we didn't take, so those kids came in with something to prove.

That's when Coach Burnett, who I have so much respect



and admiration for and I consider a dear friend who I've visited with, her teams were -- man, Danny, you talk about tough and defensive minded and physical.

So I am super familiar with Missouri State. Back then it was Southwest Missouri State. You combine them with Stephen F. Austin, those two schools probably turned me down for head coaching jobs. I applied there a minimum of six times total between those two schools trying to get jobs there when it was available. You know, that list obviously is long and illustrious throughout my career.

But very familiar with Missouri State. Coach has done a great job with them. A 6 seed winning their tournament championship speaks to again kids getting better and peaking at the right time.

Q. We've seen the kind of turbo boost that Justice can give the offense at times. We've also seen it kind of stall out, her minutes get limited. What do you need from her and what do you think you can get from her in this tournament?

VIC SCHAEFER: Yeah, that's what I need, I need that burst, I need that -- you know, sometimes I almost think we sneak up on people with our -- and by the time they figure it out, she's hit them for 10 or 12 real quick. On those nights usually she's lined up and really good and focused.

You saw it in the South Carolina game. She was emotionally involved in that game. When she was on her little run, man, she's "let's go." You could read it on her lips and screaming at her teammates.

Man, that's a special kid. That's a kid that I've always said this about her, if I can get her to really invest and focus, she's an all-conference type player in my mind. She's again the most physical high school kid I've ever recruited, I've ever seen. When you can get her to impact a game like we've seen her do at times, it just changes our team. She really changes our team for the better.

And I'm happy for that kid, happy for her family. I know Casey, her mom, is super proud of her as well as her sisters. That is really a tight group.

I need that from her. Our team needs it from her. And you know, she can impact the game defensively, too. She's long, she's got great timing blocking shots and she can rebound the ball. It's good to have that version of Justice Carlton.

Q. You've mentioned multiple times instances where Rori spoke up in a team meeting or film session or something and kind of said something that changed

how the team was reacting. How often do moments like that actually happen, and what effect does Rori have on the culture of this team?

VIC SCHAEFER: Yeah, it doesn't happen a whole lot. I mean, I think her and Madison in particular, Kyla would be the third one, they get a sense from me when I may be concerned about how things are going or disappointed in how things are going, and when that happens, I think that's when they -- I think that's when they understand, hey, we probably need to stand up and say something.

I've said this before, you know, after the Vanderbilt game that Friday, Booker was very vocal in practice. Really, really adamant vocal in practice. That's what you want to see.

Rori stood up here a while back in film, talked about, hey, the standard here defensively, 60 points. We've given up 66 in our last five games. That's not the standard. I've been here five years, I know what the standard is, I know what it looks like. We're not doing it.

So you want kids to be accountable. I mean, I'm big on that word, I'm big on living it. I've tried to impart that on our players. Being accountable in this world, there's not a lot of people left sometimes that are, and it's a real value in my opinion. Employers want that, coaches want that, and so I really try to teach our kids to be accountable. You know, the truth hurts sometimes. There's pain in leadership, but it's all part of it. Again, I'm trying to teach more than Xs and Os and an out-of-bounds play with three seconds left.

Q. A question, and then I've got a followup. You mentioned at the SEC tournament that you felt like the team was on a bit of a mission. Do you get that sense with what you're seeing in practice and how they're approaching things?

VIC SCHAEFER: Yeah, I certainly felt that way at the SEC tournament. I just, I felt like when we got on the plane on that Wednesday, there were some kids that I could look in their eyes and I felt like they're here to win the tournament.

I've really been preaching to this group now for a week that it can be done, they're good enough. You know, every day I've got a thought or two -- usually I have one thought for the day, I've been rolling some at them three or four a day just trying to get them to understand this team is special, they are good enough. But you've got to show up.

We have three two-game tournaments. This is what we hope we have left, but it's all single elimination. We've won six games in a row this year multiple times. But that's what it's going to take, just trying to get them to understand, limit

distractions right now. You've got three weeks for the rest of your life, live in this moment right now, today.

Just trying to get them to really understand how special this moment is. Like there are no -- this is not a given. I know we've been back to back to back No. 1, been in a 1 seed, but this isn't given. You need to really understand how hard it is to do, appreciate it, but then now live it. We've got to go out and live and try to navigate this schedule that's in front of us. You know, it starts tomorrow at 3:00 and again, you better not have a bad night the rest of this time now or you'll be done.

Q. Aaliyah Crump seems like offensively, no problem. Where is she defensively in her evolution here freshman year?

VIC SCHAEFER: Yeah, I think typical of a freshman, I see some things. Like I told her the other night after the South Carolina game, you know, I saw her turn and run defensively, you know, after about four, five possessions in that game. Sometimes you don't get freshmen to get that concept at all.

And again, the kid was out two months. You have to give her so much grace. To throw her back into the fire in the SEC is so unfair, yet we didn't get a chance to play, you know, anyone else. It was the SEC.

So she had to really come back against some really good teams, and she had some really good games. She probably also would say, "Yeah, and I struggled a night or two as well," which is typical. Whether you had a two-month injury or not, freshmen are going to struggle in this league occasionally.

So defensively she's about where I would think most freshmen are, and maybe at times can appear to maybe be a little bit ahead at times. Like I said, I saw her turn and run and get ahead defensively one on one the other night and I'm like, hey, she's getting it.

I'd like to see her just continue to keep working, which she does every day in practice. But she's a lot like her head coach, she lives and dies with every little thing she does, good and bad. A lot like Rori.

It's hard to live that way, I'm proof of that. It's just hard as a player to live that way because you can't get too high, too low, you've just got to stay even keel, next play. Just like our team, win or lose, you've got to stay right here. I think with this team, that's where we've been. I haven't walked in the locker room too many times after a win and everybody's just bouncing off the wall. Job done. What's next, Coach? Who we got next? What time's the bus

loading and where we loading? That's just kind of been their attitude, and you like that.

Q. You talked about this team still having an edge. For this group, where does that edge come from? Do you feel like it's something to prove, or how do you cultivate it as a coach for this group?

VIC SCHAEFER: Well, I mean, I think they're around me and they know I've got an edge. I also think that they got a taste of it last year and hopefully they want to get back to where we were and understand what it took to get there, then understand what it takes to stay there two days longer.

Again, you can't get caught looking that far ahead right now. What you've got to do is you've got to try to navigate one day at a time, one game at a time right now. And again, I think the edge comes with a Rori Harmon. She isn't ready for it to be over. She don't want it to be over. I think our other seniors, they don't want it to be over. They appreciate the opportunity, they appreciate where we are right now in their career, and they're not ready for it to be over. So I think that's where a lot of the edge comes from.

Q. Coach, obviously you've got a senior in Ashton Judd. She was from the Springfield area. What's she kind of meant for you this year. I know she's going to have little bumps on the road with her injury, her rotation, and her dad played at Missouri State so I'm sure that's come up. What do you have to say about Ashton, what she's done?

VIC SCHAEFER: Ashton's been spectacular. I hated that she got hurt. She too was out eight weeks, I think, six to eight weeks. When she fractured her kneecap, just a freak deal.

The kid's been everything I thought she'd be from a toughness and a competitive standpoint. She just is a super tough kid, super competitive. When she wasn't playing, she stayed accurate, kept working, and has worked her way back into the rotation.

Again, great kid. Love the fact that we've been able to have -- would have loved to have coached her four years, but I know her former coach at Missouri and knew that she would be my kind of kid coming from there, playing for her. And she's been great.

Again, as I've said with her, Teya, Kyla, you know, those kids, I would have loved to have coached them all four years, they're just my kind of kids.

Again, I think it's her toughness and competitive spirit that

really sets her apart. She's a great teammate. Like, her teammates love her. She just fits our culture. She fits the kind of player that I like coaching and teaching and working with.

