

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Tennessee vs Texas

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

Tennessee Volunteers

Kim Caldwell

Samara Spencer

Ruby Whitehorn

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Texas 67, Tennessee 59

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We'll open with comments from Coach Kim Caldwell and then take questions for the players.

KIM CALDWELL: I was proud of how hard we played. A big point of emphasis was rebounding and we did what we needed to there. They just did such a great job of rushing us into shots and forcing some turnovers down the stretch when we needed to get some shots off.

I am incredibly thankful for this group that I got to coach. They did exactly what we said we were going to do, which was get Tennessee back into the top 25. They bought in, they played hard, they've been a joy to coach. God blessed me to be able to coach this group of kids. I am thankful for them. Any success that we have at Tennessee from here on out is because of this team.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For both of you, you are two players who decided to transfer to Tennessee last year and take a chance on Kim's first season. What do you feel like you gave to this program to help establish that foundation and what has this season under Kim meant for you guys?

SAMARA SPENCER: I would say what I've given to this program is energy and effort, like we hone in on a lot. Tenacity I would say. Somebody who is willing to go the extra mile for her teammates.



It's meant a lot to me to play for Coach Kim, especially this being her first year at the University of Tennessee. I think we did something special and I really think we put Tennessee back on the map. I'm glad our group to do it for her first year and I'm excited to see what the future holds for them.

Q. Ruby, what does this season mean for the momentum of this program?

RUBY WHITEHORN: Yeah, it means everything right now. This is just year one of playing this style of basketball and we, I feel like, showed the world what it could be, how great it could be. And like they said, it all started because of the seniors and everything we do from here on out will be because of them.

Q. For both of you, a lot has been made of how you guys play, both of you being transfers in the system for the first year, how would you describe your experience in Coach's system?

SAMARA SPENCER: I really enjoyed it, honestly. I can remember back to AAU days when we used to play full-court press the entire game and that was really fun, haven't had that much fun in a long time playing basketball.

RUBY WHITEHORN: It was definitely a challenge but for the most part it's been a very, very fun experience. The hard times, the fun times, like, you gotta take it all and it's been great.

Q. For both of you, looking back, what was your first impression of Coach, and what do you feel like you have learned about her as a person and as a coach?

SAMARA SPENCER: I would say my first impression of her, her résumé presumes her. She is a winner. You want to be coached by somebody who has that ability to be able to win at each level that they go to. And the fact that she did what she did at Marshall and Glenville State it showed it would be possible at Tennessee. Not a lot of people thought it would be possible in the first year but we came and we helped her do that, and I think that it was really



special.

RUBY WHITEHORN: Yeah, I think my first impression I already said, she is a dog. First time being on the phone, she didn't say much. Just got straight to the point and I didn't really talk as much. She just told me what she wanted to do and pretty much hung up on me, you know. (Laughter.)

Q. For both you guys, something with this system requires everybody to be bought in fully. You can't go halfway, you can't give 75%. You have to fully buy in. For both of you, what it is about Coach that makes you want to buy in, that gets the whole team to buy into this?

SAMARA SPENCER: I mean, she really only asks two things, energy and effort. A lot of coaches ask you to do a lot of things here and a lot of things there and sometimes it's not really possible, but it's controllable for you to give energy and effort, and for her that's the biggest thing.

That's all she really wants from us and I think a coach who believes in you to be able to do that, and doesn't really want anything but that, I think that that's what Coach gives us.

RUBY WHITEHORN: 100% agree. I think the way we play, everybody has to be bought in, you can't take a play off. If one person takes a play off, it's a breakdown. But if you have that energy and that effort, you scramble out of it and we scramble out of it well.

So like she said, being bought in and giving it your all.

Q. Ruby, I know this was your first NCAA Tournament since you came here to Tennessee. It's not how you wanted it to end, but what was this experience like for you for your first time in the Big Dance?

RUBY WHITEHORN: It was a very, very fun experience. I couldn't imagine going into it with any other team, with any other coaches. They pushed me to be the best and I feel like I've grown more as a player in this one short year than I have in years.

So it's just a very special experience and I'm very grateful to be here.

Q. Ruby, you have a chance to come back next year. What do you think you guys need to do to take that next step and get to an Elite Eight or Final Four?

RUBY WHITEHORN: I just think that with all of our incoming players, especially our freshmen, getting them

bought in early, pouring into them, stepping up and being more of a leader is going to be important for the upperclassmen next year, because we've learned this system and it's time to teach our newcomers so we can get to it faster.

Now that we have learned this system I feel like it's going to be a lot easier for us to just go into the season with that level of comfortability, like we're safe, you know what I'm saying? We know what we're doing and just try to pour into the newcomers.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies.

Q. What did this season mean to you as a coach, and what did it mean for Danny White to believe in you?

KIM CALDWELL: For someone like him to believe in me means the world and I will spend every day trying to prove him right. I spent a lot of this season and we as a team spent a lot of the season trying to prove people wrong, but I think you have to reframe it and prove the people that believed in you right.

Q. Coming in next year and being able to teach a new group, how big of a leap is that in the second year when you have a team that's bought in and can pass it on?

KIM CALDWELL: It's so much better. It's so much easier for the players that have done it once to do it again. Everyone's second year is usually their better year and people always ask, how long does it take to figure it out? Sometimes it takes a year.

So all of our returners should be better and then we will have more coaches on the floor. We won't be having to teach 15 players a completely new brand of basketball.

Q. Kim, you said in your opening statement that any success that Tennessee has in your tenure will be credit to the senior class this season. What do you feel like they gave you that impacted the program so much and helped set that foundation?

KIM CALDWELL: I think they gave me everything they had. Every single ounce of anything they had, I think they gave it for this program.

Q. Coach, how do you think your full-court pressure helped -- what worked about it today? How do you think it helped swing the momentum especially in the third quarter, when it was super close and it was loud in there?

KIM CALDWELL: I think the majority of our runs came off effort plays and those were good, and we had a period I think it was midway, towards the end of the third, beginning of the fourth I can't remember when, where they were missing layups, because they were fatigued but we didn't capitalize on it.

Q. Coach, what made it so hard just offensively? Obviously it's Texas' defense but were there things they were doing that slowed you down from the type of offense that you like to have?

KIM CALDWELL: They did a great job of taking Jewel Spear and Talaysia Cooper out of the game. They did a good job of being in the gaps, so we turned the ball over down the stretch. They just rushed our shots. I think the whole first quarter we were playing a little too fast, and sped up, and maybe that was nerves, but you have to give them credit. They're one of the best defenses in the country, and we got some open looks, we just didn't hit them.

Q. Talk about representing West Virginia on sports' highest stage in the Sweet 16 with a program like Tennessee?

KIM CALDWELL: I love West Virginia. I'm proud to be a West Virginian. I am very appreciative of my roots and I coached in a small, one-stoplight town. Not a whole lot there. Very blue collar. It's built who I am as a coach.

I will always be a West Virginian, and I will always love the people that are there. There are so many people in that state that helped me get here. I can't go through the list. They know who they are but without them I wouldn't be here.

Q. When you kind of reflect on what this team became in March, I know before this game you wanted -- the way you guys played against Ohio State and the way you played tonight to be what you remember about this season. What excites you about the foundation you feel like you've built this season?

KIM CALDWELL: I think the foundation is set. Again, it's off of this team. This team has laid the foundation and that was important and selfless and we would have loved to have gotten one more win, we would've loved to go to the Elite Eight but we didn't.

We have a good class coming in. We have a few pieces to fill and then it will just hopefully be smoother sailing in the preseason trying to teach everything next time around.

Q. With Tess and Sara having spent their college

career here, Tess for five years, when did those two mean for the program?

KIM CALDWELL: They're selfless players and they wanted to do it for Tennessee. They wanted to make it to the Elite Eight because it's something that hasn't been done since they've been here.

Again, we didn't meet that goal but two players that want it for other people and that are selfless, you don't get players like that very much.

Q. Hi, Coach, one of the highlights of the game was seeing baby Conor there at the game. What did it mean to you to have your son there, even though he won't remember and the support of your family in being able to do what y'all did?

KIM CALDWELL: Yeah, I think personally the support of my family is unmatched. My husband has stepped up big. It's been a tough year. It's hard to have a baby in the middle of basketball season, I really don't recommend it.

So my mom has come. She has stayed. She has helped. You don't always get to pick your parents. You do get to pick your spouse but I got lucky enough to have help through this journey, through this process and when you have to miss a game and sit on the couch with your two-day old son and for him this is the first game he got to come to was special.

But I appreciate the administration at Tennessee, my team, again, my support system that we could make it through the year and everything was a blessing. I know that there are coaches that coach through things that are not blessing - sickness and deaths and all of those things. I got to coach through blessing after blessing with a team that I love.

But it meant a lot to have him here and I appreciate every single person that helped me through this season.

Q. Coach, this will always be your first team at Tennessee. I know after a loss that ends the season it's an emotional locker room, but what did you say to this team after the game?

KIM CALDWELL: I told them exactly what I told you. I told them to keep their heads up. I told them that I am proud of them, that I am thankful for them. I know for a fact that God put this team together because this is the team that we needed to have. These are the people that I needed to have in my life, and we needed each other. Tess also said the same thinking.

I thanked them, and I told them that any success we have going forward is because of them. And they can be former Lady Vols, and they can cheer us on, and they can know that they helped build the foundation. And they set the tone, and they set what it was. They have a lot to be proud of year one. It hurts. It's always hard when you have people whose career just ended. And it's always a tough locker room, but again, I'm beyond proud of them. We hit some failure toward the last half of the season, and we let failure be a learning tool for us.

We didn't quit, we didn't hang our heads. I do think we got better, from losing three of our last four games, and there is not a lot of teams that would have the resilience to get better and learn from that, and they did. They've just progressed so much from the time I started coaching them to now. I think they're better humans. I think they're tougher mentally, better basketball players, and so they have no reason to hang their head.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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