

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

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Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Kenny Brooks

Clara Strack

Teonni Key

Tonie Morgan

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Kentucky Wildcats Head Coach Kenny Brooks. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Brooks.

KENNY BROOKS: Obviously we're glad to be here. This is a very special time of year. Glad we were able to participate further. We had a tremendous weekend last weekend, but it's been a really good year for us.

We've been a little bit up and down, but we learned a lot about ourselves. I thought through some of the adversity we kind of grew stronger together, and it really helped fuel us.

So very proud of my kids. I think we have a really good, unique group of young ladies who want to go out and try to be the best they can possibly be.

It's kind of showed in their work, and as a result, we've gotten this far. I'm very happy and proud to be here.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Jordan Obi came back from injury this season into a starting role and moved into a significant role off the bench. How have you seen her grow as a player and a person since she first arrived in Lexington?

KENNY BROOKS: You need players like Jordan Obi who are willing to sacrifice for the betterment of the team. She came here with high aspirations, and I still think she's accomplishing everything she's set out to accomplish; just



in a different role.

You know, she started off and we've asked her to play positions that she's not familiar playing, and she's done nothing but try to adapt to that role, whatever role we've tried to put her in. It's not easy to go through your whole career essentially as a starter and then being asked probably at the very end to switch it up again and come off the bench and add a spark.

Never complained about it and just came in and just tried to perfect her role and really gave us a spark off the bench. But it also -- no fault of her own, but putting Asia Boone in the starting lineup gives us an opportunity to stretch the floor early; then she comes in and is able to just come in and play her natural position right away.

So I thought it helped us all the way around.

Q. Obviously you are a different team from the last time you played Texas, but can you speak to the preparation to deal with that defensive pressure and how maybe the round of 32 match-up helps you get in that mindset?

KENNY BROOKS: We're a different team, but so are they. We were playing them at a time that they lost a few. They're hitting on all cylinders right now, which is evident by winning the SEC Tournament and then their first two round games. They looked spectacular.

It's kind of -- it's interesting how things match up. We came out, and the game we played against West Virginia was tremendous preparation for us and what we're going to be able to see. There is familiarity, because we have seen Texas. We've played against them. We know their size. We know their speed. We know how they play.

But nonetheless, this game is going to be a one-off game. It's for all the marbles, win or go home. It's going to be a different intensity level. Essentially it's probably going to be a home game for them, so to speak, but we've played well in front of crowds that weren't for us, which was evident in the West Virginia game, when we went to Louisville and played; we played at LSU and were very



successful.

I think we're prepared for it, but they're a great team. Vic does a tremendous job in getting his players to play to their fullest, and we're going to have our hands full.

Q. Just big-picture question. I don't know if you saw Cori's comments from yesterday just about how tiring it is now for coaches in your position going through everything you're going through in the tournament with all of the changes. I'm wondering just what your thoughts are on that and how your job has changed and what the exhaustion level is.

KENNY BROOKS: I'm exhausted, and my staff is exhausted. It's a little bit sad, because you work hard. You do everything in preparation to get to this moment, and when you get to this moment, you want to be able to stop and reflect and enjoy it.

We went to the Final Four three years ago, and I remember during this time, it was moments to just really reflect. You had an opportunity to just really look at the police escort that you had coming in and you got to embrace it. We won our game last week; the next day we were meeting for hours and hours and hours about recruiting and what's next.

With so many things going on, you haven't really had an opportunity to sit back and reflect. As much as you work and how hard you worked to get to this point, you know, you want to smile about it sometimes, but you're always thinking about what's on the horizon for tomorrow.

It's ever-changing, and that's the frustrating part, because you can never get a grasp on any of it. You think that you have it. Then all of a sudden it's like somebody pulls a rug out and says, no, we're changing it and now it's going to be this way now.

It's extremely frustrating because we, my staff in particular, they're very hard-working and we want to get out ahead of everything, but we can't. We always seem like we're one step behind because there are so many changes in what's going on.

So I totally agree. It's a 180 from where it was the last time I was in this situation, and hopefully things will die down so that you can enjoy moments like this.

Because like I told my staff and I didn't even really realize it, and I've been a head coach for 24 years, and this is the second time that I've been to the Sweet 16. You know, we've come close, but this is only the second time that I've gotten here.

I want to enjoy it, and it's really hard to because of everything that's going on.

Q. Along the same lines, you see Vic Schaefer out there on the opposing sideline, and one of the greatest coaches out there. This isn't your first rodeo either. Emotionally how exciting can it be to be able to match wits with somebody like him, especially in a game which you know it's going to be a chess match?

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, Vic is one of the best. I admire Vic so much. Not only in the way that he coaches his team. Vic and I share similar stories with family. He has his daughter on his staff. He was an inspiration to me, you know, because so many times people would tell me that you can't have your family around your program. It can be a distraction. It can't be good for your program.

I watched Vic. I took my middle daughter to the Final Four when they beat -- when Mississippi State beat UConn, and it was just she and I. We were there. I watched Vic coach his daughter, and to success.

Then I watched Vic put his daughter on staff, and he and I have shared many, many stories. We've talked about it. He's inspired me a lot, and having family around my program has been the best thing that I've ever, ever done professionally, because it not only gives your culture a family-style culture, it gives I call it bonus time. I have bonus time with my family.

When I missed so much growing up, I was so busy trying to make a life I wasn't living a life. I remember during COVID, we were all around the table with three of my daughters, and they would talk about all these stories growing up, and I'm, like, where was I? They were, like, well, you were probably recruiting.

For me to be able to enjoy these moments of having them on the sidelines with me and around, you know, it's the best thing that's happened to me. That's been an inspiration because of what Vic has taught me and told me about everything.

So when I go up against him, he's a fiery competitor. I mean, he will kick your butt and then come shake your hand and tell you that you're the best person in the world and you believe it. And you believe it, but he does mean it. He's sincere. He's one of the best people in this business.

If anybody wants to look to somebody for inspiration or just guidance or mentorship or how they want to be, Vic Schaefer is the epitome of that, and I respect him a lot. His teams always play well. He's been a huge inspiration for

me.

Q. What is the importance of having such a deep senior class at this point in the season?

KENNY BROOKS: Well, obviously they're experienced. Their maturity. They've seen a lot, which was evident for us when we went into West Virginia and it was 13,000 screaming Mountaineer fans, and we didn't get rattled at all, because they had all been through it.

As you look -- and I haven't dug into, it but I bet you a lot of the rosters that are still here are senior-laden. They have a lot of experience. Obviously with the transfer portal, that's kind of the way things have gone. You see a lot of older basketball teams.

So for us it's paid dividends. Just their maturity and they've been through so many different environments. That's helped us a lot. I mentioned it earlier that we've had some really tough road games that we came out on top of, and it was because of that senior leadership.

It's done a little bit differently now because they've all come from different places, and it took us a little while to try to mesh and try to get the leadership hierarchy down, and it happened, but we wanted it to happen organically.

It has, and it's morphed into something that now we feel that we have great leadership, we have great maturity, and it can help us win basketball games.

Q. It's a two-parter question. Last year Amelia made 55 threes, and this year she's up to 98 while shooting a higher percentage. The first question on that is was there anything that you saw in the offseason that you kind of saw to think she was going to have that kind of massive jump?

KENNY BROOKS: Absolutely, yeah. I'm glad you brought up Amelia. Amelia is our unsung hero. Not only does she shoot the basketball as well as she does, she actually plays and defends against the best defender all the time.

So she comes out and she gives it her all. She had a tremendous summer. Last year I would ask her, who is the best shooter on the team, and she would say Georgia. I would say, no, who is the best shooter on the team? She would answer my question with a question. She would say, me?

This summer she came in and I said, who is the best shooter on the team? And emphatically with an exclamation point, she said, me! Every time she catches it she gets an opportunity. She knows she has a green light.

She has tremendous confidence. Tremendous confidence from her teammates and her coaches. She's a big plus, and I love coaching her every second of what she's done, and I think she's going to be a big part of our success continuing on.

Q. The term "investment" is used a lot in women's sports, and people wanting more and more investment. I'm wondering from your perspective, Kentucky did the big renovation, got that great arena now in women's basketball. I know part of coming to Kentucky, a lot of reasons, it was for more resources, looking for that more investment. Schools all over the country, women's basketball still having to fight for every penny as the landscape even changes. How have you experienced -- how has investment helped you in your career and what would you like to see going forward?

KENNY BROOKS: One of the main reasons that I came to the University of Kentucky was for consistent investment. You look across -- and part of the exhaustion part, I've been a women's basketball coach for 24 years, and it's been a battle fighting consistently for investment just into the sport. Not only financially, but emotionally support.

I watch these young women come out and they compete, and they represent and they do everything the right way, and that's all you want for them is to get the same opportunities that their counterparts get. I will continue to fight for that.

I think that we do a tremendous job of representing the University of Kentucky in a way that should be rewarded with investment, consistent investment, because our young ladies, they go out and they fight, they represent, and they do everything the right way.

With the landscape of everything right now, it's topsy-turvy. You don't know what investments are. I think you're seeing a lot of head-scratching movements, maybe some coaches going from one level down to a level. People are, like, what the heck is going on?

I think a lot of it has to do with investment, you know, investment into the sport, because obviously NIL and rev sharing, everything is changing the landscape.

I saw an article about our blue bloods on the men's side gone because of investment and what's going on. So hopefully we can get some guardrails up, because I think everything was trending in the right direction, and hopefully it continues to trend in the right direction with women's sports.

I was a part of the Final Four a couple of years ago when the big boom happened when it was Caitlin Clark and that was tremendous for our sport, and I hope we continue on that trajectory. But it is going to take investment across the board so that you can continue on, because the landscape is changing.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time. We are joined by student-athletes Tonie Morgan, Teonni Key, and Clara Strack. We'll now open it up for questions.

Q. Any of you can answer this, but obviously Texas is a familiar opponent from conference play. What sorts of things have you been focusing on as you look ahead into this game and into how to come out victorious?

TONIE MORGAN: We've been focusing on just playing together, making it a team effort on both ends of the ball, and then knowing how to break their pressure and then attacking it.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, we've been doing that as well as looking back at the game we previously played against them and just seeing in what ways we could have been better and implementing that into our game plan this time.

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, like you said, it was familiar, so we have film from the first time so we know how to improve off that. But I mean, so do they, so I think just being able to combat that and then handling their obvious pressure that they have.

Q. Coach Brooks has been there two years, and he has completely redone the roster and has everybody together. Talk about playing for Coach Brooks and what he's like and what you guys have learned from him.

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, I mean, I think obviously I think he's a great coach. I came with him here, but I think he has a good -- he does a good job at getting a lot out of his players and then being able to, like, get us all to play together.

As you said, we haven't all played together for a long time, so I think being able to build that chemistry with the team and then able to get a lot out of us, so...

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, exactly. He does such a good job of just coming to us and like having an open flow. So allowing us to come to him too as well and just helping us grow as individual players, helping us come together, and then just helping us help each other too. Like showing us

how we can help our other teammates and how their games can get better as well.

I think it's just he's a great coach, so yeah.

TONIE MORGAN: Yeah, what both of them said. He just cares so much about our development and how we develop as people outside of basketball players, and that means a lot to me.

Q. I wondered, you guys are coming into this in the NIL era where women's basketball players are getting paid and getting resources. I wonder if you followed the WNBA CBA negotiations any, and what your thoughts are on what the players were able to achieve.

TONIE MORGAN: I think it was amazing. It shows how women's sports are trending upward and how people are coming to watch. But I just think that it's (indiscernible) that the ladies are able to kind of I don't want to say get what they're owed, but they're able to be appreciated, so...

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's huge, honestly. NIL within college as well as what the WNBA was able to achieve, all of it that's been happening as of late. It just shows, like she said, the traction that women's basketball is getting and just getting what we're owed and stuff like that.

Then the W, it's an upward trajectory. Everything is -- there's a lot of eye on women's basketball, so I think just having that, it's huge. It's going to be cool to see how it all plays out and keeps changing within the future, because surely it will.

Q. Cori Close, the UCLA head coach, said yesterday that she was tired with all of the changes happening and everything that coaches have to do, so coaches have been asked about that this week, including Kenny. I'm wondering throughout your collegiate career if you have noticed any changes in your coaches as they've taken on more and adjusted to the changing landscape in college athletics?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, I mean, there definitely is a lot of changes, and you do hear the talk about that. I think we have heard Coach Brooks talk about that, how it's just so different. Obviously I don't think we've experienced it as much.

But I think, like coaches, especially Coach Brooks, he really doesn't let that play into what he does with us or the team. I think he lets that be a side and not really be a factor in how we practice, how we get better, how we perform, things like that.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, I think, like Tonie said earlier, Coach Brooks does a great job of caring about us as people as well, so I think just him instilling in us to keep the main thing the main thing, not letting anything of the changes and outside noise affect the basketball. He is really big on that.

So just allowing us to just stay focussed on what really matters to us, and that's basketball. He does a great job with that and just keeping our heads, like, focused and on the right things.

Q. This is for the seniors. I wonder if at the end of your collegiate careers, in moments like this, do you feel more pressure since you know this is kind of the final round? We were talking earlier with some younger teams about how sometimes youth can be a benefit in these moments because you don't know how hard it is to get there and when you're older, you do. I'm wondering how you're processing the pressure and the opportunity in front of you.

TONIE MORGAN: That's a good question. I would say that I try not to look at it as pressure, because basketball is a sport. It's a game. It's supposed to be fun.

I do realize that at any moment this could be my last collegiate game, but I try to have fun with the last moments on the court with my teammates at all times. Just keep it light-hearted, because pressure can make you a little tense, so just stay flowing and knowing that you can keep playing as well, so yeah.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, I would say the exact same thing. Just being where your feet are and cherishing every moment. I think this group is so special. So this year has been up and down, but it's been so special, so much that we've learned from it.

This is what you play for. You play knowing that you want to go to -- you want to play in March. You want to make deep runs in March, but in March it's win or go home. I think there's no pressure, because it's just this is what we work for all year, so...

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