

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Notre Dame vs Vanderbilt

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Justine Pissot

Sacha Washington

Mikayla Blakes

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with an opening statement from Coach Ralph.

SHEA RALPH: Thank you for being here. I love seeing a full room of media covering our sport. We are thrilled to be here as well. We are excited about it, because we know that we've earned it.

We had a great hour of practice just now. We're ready to go. It's a fun time of year in March. Excited to represent Vanderbilt in the Sweet 16 this weekend.

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

Q. Shea, when you face Notre Dame tomorrow, you'll be facing off against Iyana Moore, who obviously played for you for four years. What do you see in having to face someone who transferred from your team, and what have you seen her do for Notre Dame this year?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, it's so great to witness how she's continued to grow and how she's helped her team be better. We have so much love for Iyana Moore. She gave us four amazing years. She's part of the foundation of our program and one of the reasons that we're here is what she did for us when we got here.

And remember, she was part of the class that didn't commit under me, so she graduated from Vanderbilt. She went to



Notre Dame. They've done a great job with her, and she's a huge reason for them as well. Iyana is a winner, and I'm excited that we get to play against each other tomorrow.

I'm excited for her success, and I look forward to watching her career grow even after she leaves Notre Dame.

Q. Sacha Washington and Iyana were freshman year roommates, and they've grown a camaraderie. Did you notice this when you were coaching and what did you notice about their bond on the court?

SHEA RALPH: I think when you play a team sport at a really high level, most of the joy is the friendships that you build, the way that you grow up together.

Now, remember, Iyana and Sacha went through a lot. They committed, and then they lost the staff that they committed to. Then we brought in a whole new staff, and we had some rough couple of years there where we leaned on them a lot. They had to grow up really quickly.

I think those are the kinds of things that you bond over. They were also great friends and huge reasons why we were successful, but just a lot of fun to be around as well. I think that's why they were such good friends and are such good friends.

Q. It's not often you have a match-up of two of the nation's leading scorers. I wonder how much will you just kind of enjoy that watching as a basketball fan, and also what kind of role do you have to kind of keep Mikayla from getting outside her game with the match-up like that?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I mean, I think any time you can witness high-level basketball being played, whether you're on the court coaching it, whether you're playing with players that are high-level players, or on a team that's a high-level team or watching it on TV, you're witnessing greatness, right?

Obviously one of the things that has helped me this year is just enjoying every moment that I get with my team. She's not our only great player, but watching Mikayla, coaching



Mikayla, has been one of the greatest blessings of my career.

Hannah is also a great player in her own right. What I do know about my player, Mikayla, is I don't have to worry about her getting outside of herself. I never have, and my guess is I never will. She was built for these moment. She's prepared and ready, and it really doesn't matter who we play against.

Q. When you were recruiting Aubrey Galvan, what stood out the most to you about her as a player and a person?

SHEA RALPH: When I saw her for the first time, I think it's easy -- maybe just in life -- to judge a book by its cover, right? We've been doing this a long time, and I think the thing that stuck out to me right away was her confidence. She was unflappable. She was having the best time, had a smile on her face, and was just carving people up. Just carving them up game after game after game. Really, really good players. Really good teams. Having a blast.

She just knew how to play. Her IQ is super high. I felt like every decision she made was a great one. She could score a bunch of different ways. Her off-balance scoring, her ability to get to the rim, her shot-making from the 3-point line, but really it was her passing that helped me understand how high her IQ was. You could tell her team loved playing with her, and she was super coachable.

To me, that's a no-brainer. We saw that right out of the gate. Then when I talked to her, it was like I was talking to my niece at the time who was 14. It was like she just talks about what she does off the court and talked about her family and her boyfriend. I thought this kid has no idea how good she's going to be. She's super humble, but she's excited for the opportunity to compete at a high level.

She had a chip on her shoulder. She wanted to prove probably to herself, but she just want to do prove herself. I think she's already done that.

Q. Kind of a big-picture question for you: Sports is changing so much right now, and I wonder how you think about coaches' voices and their role as the sport moves forward. You were with Geno for a long time, and he's someone who weighs in on topics to move women's basketball forward and is asked to do that a lot. When you think about right now, how important is it for lots of coaches to be in that conversation publicly?

SHEA RALPH: I think that's our job. I mean, we wear a lot of hats as coaches, but I think we have to be part of the

conversation, because we're the ones that are in the locker rooms. We're the one recruiting these young women. We're the ones that are navigating the landscape and also in charge of leading young women.

So we have to make sure that we're part of the conversation, but I think it's important that we're on the same page, too. As the landscape changes -- and I'll speak for myself. I take it very seriously the job of leading young women. So the world is always going to change. We know that. It's changed for us. There's always going to be some new distraction. There's always going to be something that gets in the way of what you're supposed to be doing.

But if I didn't have people that kept me on the straight and narrow when I was younger, I don't know where I would be right now. So while college athletics is going through this massive landscape change, I think there's a lot of good around that as long as we can start to nail down what that looks like, but I think it's still our job as coaches to protect the college student-athlete mold and model.

They're still kids. They still need direction. They still need to be able to learn how to overcome adversity. They still need leadership. They still need relationships. They are not commodities. They are kids.

As we do this in coaching and we have NIL and we have the transfer portal and we have recruiting, high school kids, and build these huge staffs so we can manage what that looks like for our own teams and programs, we still have to remember our core job is to mentor and lead young women, to educate them and prepare them for the next step. That is our job.

Basketball is part of that, but basketball to me is the easiest part of that. That's what we do. That's our vehicle to make sure we're helping them grow.

Q. Shea, when you watched Hannah on tape, what makes her so effective as a defensive player, particularly her ability to get a lot of steals?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I think she plays really hard. You have a player that plays really hard, good things usually happen, and you can tell she's been playing a lot. She's experienced.

Notre Dame obviously leans a lot on her, but obviously also has USA basketball experience, and she has a high basketball IQ. I love the way that they play her on defense. It allowed her -- I said this yesterday -- to be a free safety in a lot of ways. Because of her high IQ and competitiveness, she takes full advantage of that. She's a

really good defensive player.

Q. I know you said Mikayla, you're not worried about her getting outside of her herself. What motivates her and the competitiveness? Like a lot of players when they are facing another top player, they get up more for that game. Like, there's excitement for that. Like, that's a motivating factor, and she and Hannah go back to the high school days of facing off against one another and having these guard match-ups. Do you think that motivates her?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I'm sure it does. You know, you probably would have to be laying down on the ground not to be excited about what's going to happen tomorrow and being at this point in the season.

I think Mikayla is motivated internally by lots of different things that don't have anything to do with certain matchups or other players. She finds her joy and her motivation outside of that.

She is a winner, because she's that way in everything. So she's the same way in school. She wants to be great. She's the same way in the locker room. She wants to be great. She elevates greatness in everybody. She's elevated me as a coach just because she's thoughtful, she's really smart, she works really hard. She's super driven. She's super competitive.

In terms of she is going to get up more for a game like this, I think she just wants to win because she wants to be great at everything she does. That's been who she's been since I've known her, and that's what makes her the best player in the country.

Q. Can you talk about your relationship with Candice Storey Lee and how she's impacted the program?

SHEA RALPH: How much time do we have, y'all? We'll be here -- okay.

I was at UConn for a really long time, as a player and as a coach. Almost half my life. I learned a lot from Coach Auriemma, and I remember we would talk, you know organically about the next step. Like watching people take jobs. I would hear him say, you have to make sure that you work for a leader that's in alignment with you, that is going to make sure that they share the same vision, that's going to support you. If you don't have that, it's going to be really hard to be successful, and I heard him.

I have a very specific idea and vision for the way that I felt like we could run a program and be super successful and also do our jobs as coaches, which is to lead and mentor

young women into the next phase of their life. That was really important to me, because that was done for me.

I also love to win. So when I talked to Candice, she talked for ten minutes about that on our first phone call before I even got to ask a question. For me, it was the first time that I had heard a leader in her position, an athletic director, go so deep into how passionate she was about maximizing the true full potential of college student-athletes, giving them all the resources.

I'm not just talking about money. People, relationships, facilities to some degree, access to the things that they're going to need to be successful on and off the basketball court, on and off the field.

Then she wanted to make sure that I had what I need in terms of my people. We really talked about that for most of the conversation, and that was before NIL started. So we not this shared excitement over the vision of both winning at a very high level and making sure we prepared young women for the rest of their lives and poured into them.

Then NIL came. Isn't it great that I work for an athletic director who played women's basketball at the school that I'm at, at Vanderbilt? It's not just our program. It's all across campus. With our partnership with our chancellor, we are different. It's different. It's relationship-based. We have an amazing community. I have had coaches that are texting me day in and day out. We see athletes on campus supporting other athletes, professors at our games, and we have a leader who really, really cares about that and pours into that.

I can't tell you the difference that it's made, especially because of the change in the landscape to make my job easier, to clear the path so that we can bring the right kids in, that we can pour into them and that we can actually stick to and live to the vision that we all created at Vanderbilt for winning on and off the field.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time today. We have student-athletes Sacha Washington, Justine Pissott, and then Mikayla Blakes. We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Mikayla, can you talk about your impressions of Coach Ralph and what it's like to play for her?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, a lot of funny moments, a lot of moments where she pushes you to be your best, and a lot of moments where like she just reminds you who you are.

Just like the total package of a coach. Like everything I could ever want. Basically she's done everything I want to do, too, so I just love being around her, love learning from

her, and taking everything in.

Q. Mikayla, Shea did an ESPN interview about you, and the way she described your competitiveness is she will rip the heart out of your chest and squeeze all of the blood out of it and pat you the back and walk off. I was curious how you feel about that evaluation of your competitive spirit? And the second part of the question is, how would you describe her competitiveness?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I didn't hear that one, but yeah, I would agree with it. I feel like when I'm on the court, I'm just focused on what I can do for my team to win. I'm going to do whatever it takes. I put my body on the line, so I feel like on the court I'm a different person than I am off the court.

Then for her, I would describe her the same way. She has that fire in her. She's someone you kind of just don't want to get in her way when she has her eyes set on a goal, so...

Q. Sacha, I guess your former roommate and a couple of y'all's former teammate you'll be going up against tomorrow. Can you talk about what she was like as a roommate, what she was like as a teammate, and how different it's going to be facing her?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Oh, yeah, she's an awesome roommate, awesome friend, awesome teammate. I mean, we're still friends. She was a big part of our rebuild at Vanderbilt, so I'm excited to see her and I'm just excited to play against her, see what she's learned.

I think we've built something great here, but yeah, I'll be excited.

Q. Mikayla, it's not often you have a high-stakes match-up with two of the top scorers in the country. Obviously you and Hannah have some history together. Do you try to have a different approach going, like I got to stay inside myself here, or do you get kind of fired up for a match-up like that? How do you look at it?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I take it how I take every game: Just focus on the team really. It's a team sport, team -- we have to be together as a team offensively and defensively. Whatever it takes for me to do that, I'm willing to do.

It's not really, like, I'm looking like I have to do this, I have to do that. I'm going to play freely.

Q. Mikayla, what drives you? I know it's a very

general question, but some players are really motivated by individual match-ups or awards or they just want to win. Coach said that you're just winner, that's just kind of what you do. You're so even-keeled that you're just a winner. Is there a fiery competitor? Like do you trash talk?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I'm just a winner, and I really don't really trash talk unless someone starts with me. I would say that fire in me is I still feel like an underdog to a lot of people. A lot of people still overlook me, and every time I step on the court, I just want to prove myself and feel like I do that.

Q. How you just kind of described yourself feels like maybe a representation of this team as a whole, right? Kind of for all of you, do you feel that underdog mentality a little bit, and how do you all use it for motivate you in this match-up coming up?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I think as a team we all feel it. We just want there to be respect behind Vanderbilt and our names, and that's the whole reason. Vanderbilt is on the up-come right now, and a lot of teams can't really look at us and be like okay, we'll dog-walk them by 20. Now people have to kind of respect us, and we take that with pride.

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Yeah, I agree with what Mikayla said. I also think something that separates us is we're very united, we love each other on and off the court. I think we go to battle for each other every single day we step on the court.

SACHA WASHINGTON: I personally don't think we're the underdogs, but I mean, I come in this gym every day never thinking we're the underdogs. I always think we're the best team that steps on the floor no matter what. I think it's because we've invested so much time into each other.

So I think that we have each other's back no matter what, so to me we'll never be the underdog, so yeah.

Q. Shea talked about Candice Storey Lee in her presser and how she's created an environment at the university that really prioritizes relationships with the athletes. Are there moments at Vanderbilt during your school day, things that have happened where you remember feeling this relationship, camaraderie, bond with the university?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I think one of the main reasons I decided to come here was because of Dr. Lee and because of everything she had imagined for this program and just for women's sports in general.

She's someone you can go into her office and literally have a conversation with her for, like, three hours. We'll see her at other sports events as well and just continue to talk to her and build relationships because she loves us and has invested so much into her program. We want to do the same with her.

JUSTINE PISSOTT: I would agree again with what Mikayla said. I think every sport at Vanderbilt is just invested in each other. The other day I was walking around campus, and Clark Lea was there, and he just came up and was, like, we're so proud of you. Anchor down.

A lot of schools don't have that. I think we're at a very special place at Vanderbilt.

SACHA WASHINGTON: I think what makes Dr. Lee so special is that she prioritizes these relationships, so I know that when I first came in, I didn't have a choice. Like, I was going to make friends with all the other athletes. I was going to have a relationship with Dr. Lee. I was going to have a relationship with Coach Ralph. I think prioritizing those relationships is what makes these programs so successful.

Q. Justine, Vanderbilt, obviously this isn't the ultimate goal, getting to the Sweet 16, but getting Vanderbilt back to this spot for the first time in a while, talk about what that means, and also now facing a team that's pretty much here every time.

JUSTINE PISSOTT: I think that's why we all came to Vanderbilt, was to bring Vanderbilt back in this situation. We're just super excited. I mean, our first goal was to get past the first round. Then, like I said before, we just want to keep going and going.

We're not finished yet. We have a lot to do, and I think it's pretty exciting to play against a team who has been in the Sweet 16 for multiple years.

Q. Throughout the season how have you seen your team be tested? How have you grown from that?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I would just say different ways. Different things happened. I guess you could say the SEC Tournament, we got tested in that way, but we never took it really to heart. We just continued to keep fighting. That's just who we are as a team on and off the court.

We just have so much pride in who we are as people and where we want to go that I feel like that moment we dealt with adversity, but we faced it the right way and just never

quit.

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Yeah I would agree, again, with what Mikayla said. We've had a lot of things come up on and off the court. Like she said, we have stayed true to ourselves, true to what our coaches have told us, and I feel like we've always come out on top in a positive way.

SACHA WASHINGTON: Yeah, I think we've been tested mentally and physically. I mean, our league is pretty tough, so it's physical every night. But, I mean, in practice Coach Ralph tests us mentally every single day.

So I think in the preparation she tests us. I mean, we go through adversity every single day, but I think that we never change. We stay together. Then we'll be successful.

Q. A quick follow-up. You mentioned staying true to yourselves. How would you describe the identity of Vanderbilt basketball?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I think we have standards, and I think the biggest standard that we try to uphold is rule number one is being a good person. So everything trickles down from that. If you don't know what everything else means, then you revert to number one, which is being a good person.

That's what staying true to ourselves means. We are good people no matter what happens, no matter what circumstance comes our way. We will always be a good person. No matter who walks in the room, we don't care. No matter what is thrown at us, rule number one, always be a good person. That is how we stay true to ourselves.

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