

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

Friday, March 27, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Mikayla Blakes

Aubrey Galvan

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Notre Dame 67, Vanderbilt 64

THE MODERATOR: Joining us we have head Coach Shea Ralph and her student-athletes Mikayla Blakes and Aubrey Galvan. We'll begin with an opening statement from Coach.

SHEA RALPH: Well, first of all, thank you for being here. Congratulations to Notre Dame.

I'm really proud of our team. Obviously this isn't the way we wanted our season to end, but most of the people that I know that aren't inside our circle didn't think that we would be here, didn't think we would accomplish the things that we did this year.

I know that there was a lot of questions around the squad that we had going into the season, and I think that you're seeing what's possible when you commit to believing in each other, when you work really hard, when you lay the foundation of an incredible culture, and when you invest in women, as our leadership has done in us.

This is just the beginning for our program, another step in the right direction. So yeah, we lost the game today, but I think we're winning in terms of the things that we're doing right now. We are winning on and off the basketball court. This is just the beginning for Vanderbilt women's basketball.

We will continue to compete for championships. We will continue to hopefully be in positions like today, and we will



continue to hope that the next time we're in one, we'll come away with a win and take the next step forward.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for our student-athletes first.

Q. Aubrey, I spoke to your grandfather before the game, and he said he sent you a text that said "have fun." Despite the loss, did you still have fun?

AUBREY GALVAN: Maybe not as much at first, but as the game went on, this was definitely not what we wanted, the result we wanted, but I'm out there with my sisters, basically. I definitely would call each one of my teammates family. Can't not love that.

Q. Mikayla, obviously the first half really struggling from the field, found your way to the line, really got it going. How did you kind of fight through? Was it nerves early on? Kind of what was going on? Then at the end there with the dribble, what happened?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Starting the game, I guess, human. I miss shots. So I wouldn't say it was nerves or anything like that. I just (indiscernible) the performance, because I can't perform for my team like that in a moment as big as this.

The last play with the ball, I guess just dribbled it off my foot. I saw an open lane, but I guess I moved too fast.

SHEA RALPH: I'll also say that obviously you want to be able to execute in the last possession of the game, and I think that's what makes this game fun.

But that's not what lost us this game. We wouldn't be here without her, so there are lots of things that we could have done a lot better throughout the course of that game in particular, but those two plays at the end we got two great shots.

I'm putting the ball in her hands every single time, and that's not why we lost the game.

Q. Aubrey, can you describe what Hannah Hidalgo does and the pressure she was able to put on you on a



possession by possession basis?

AUBREY GALVAN: Yeah, she's a great player. All the credit to her. I mean, she definitely -- she digs in on defense, which you don't see a lot. But yeah, just give credit to her.

Q. Aubrey, y'all really struggled in the first half with turning the ball over, and it felt like after halftime it got a little bit better. What was giving you such problems in the first half? What changes did you make to improve on that in the second half?

AUBREY GALVAN: During the second half we knew our season was on the line. You just had to dig into each other, stay together. I think we definitely emphasized that when we were going back out into the court during the second half. Definitely cleaned it up.

Q. This is for both Mikayla and Aubrey. You just heard Coach Shea talk about winning championships and building something special here at Vanderbilt. Can you guys just talk about what she's brought to this team this season and what she continues to build for Vanderbilt?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I think she has so much experience and so much belief and trust in us that we wouldn't be where we are today without a great coach like her. She gives us so much confidence every time we step out on the court that we're ready for moments.

I mean, we're paving the way here at Vanderbilt women's basketball to get it back to where it came from. She gives a lot of credit to us, and we give her the same amount of credit. It works both ways. We wouldn't be here without each other.

Q. Mikayla, I know today wasn't the result you wanted, but you all made it to the Sweet 16, and Shea just said that a lot of people outside of Vanderbilt didn't expect that this season. How important was this season as far as building and getting to where you guys want to go?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: This is a great season. It sucks we end on this note, but, like, you can't kind of ignore the things that we did this season, and we're proud of ourselves.

It hurts for a lot of us, especially our seniors, but to see what we did this year, just the belief we had in each other. I know a lot of people didn't think we would be here today, but that's because of the culture that Coach Ralph and us have built.

I mean, we're excited to get back to work so we don't feel this way again.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Questions for Coach Ralph.

Q. Shea, you had Jada defending Hannah Hidalgo for a pretty good portion of the game, and it felt like this was one of the best games that she's had defensively. Your other bench players too, Ava and Ayana Mitchell. What did you see from them bringing on the defensive end?

SHEA RALPH: Well, I felt like I needed my most aggressive kids out there, especially after the way that we started the game. We knew that she was a good player, but we've played a lot of great players and great teams this year, so our team defense needed to be a little bit better so that we could get some stops, create some offense, kind of what we've been doing all year.

What we see from Jada every single day in practice and what you guys have seen from her in games lets you know and let me know that she was the right woman for the job and she did a great job. Really happy for her, especially this being her senior year that she played so well today.

Q. We often talk about how coaches pour into players, but I wanted to ask, how have your players poured into you over the course of the season?

SHEA RALPH: Oh, listen now, I wouldn't be sitting up here without them. My players are the reason that I coach, so this group in particular, it is what it is when you're on the outside looking in. You all have no idea what this group went through. You have no idea. 99% of the stuff that has built them to this moment the outside world doesn't know.

That's part of being in a family, right, and on a team and overcoming adversity with each other. That's part of what happens when you build real trust and real friendships and real belief and real confidence, and they did that. It inspired me, because I've seen that before from places that I've been that have done great things, right?

It was something that was really important to me when I came here and talked to Candice about this job, that we laid the foundation for it. We hadn't quite got there yet. We didn't win a championship this year, but our culture is strong as hell. These kids believe in each other. They believe in what we're doing. They're sad because they want to play another game, but they can't wait to celebrate what they did this year and to get back to work.

That says something about who they are as women, because you're not going to win everything in life. You're going to stumble. Only one team wins every year, but the fact that we lost the game today does not take one thing away from the group that I have, the way that they poured into this program, and the way that they inspired me to be a better coach and a better woman.

Q. It seemed like you utilized the small ball lineup for a lot of the game with your three guards and Justine and Ayana at the five. Could you speak to why you went with that and why you chose to go with that for the remainder of the game?

SHEA RALPH: Early on, you kind of expect that. It was a little bit frantic in the beginning. Air balls, ball hitting off the backboard. We turned it over, you know. They had 54 points in the paint, but most of those were the fastbreak points from our turnovers, live ball turnovers, and just giving them layups, throwing the ball all over the place.

They played the kind of defense that has plagued us all year long, right? You work on it. You try to come up with different things to help your kids out there, and then at the end of the day I wanted players that were going to be comfortable in the position that we were in on offense to help us get a great shot.

I thought Justine did a really good job at the five spreading the floor out, handling the ball, and then Mitch is our best screener. When it came down to needing defensive stops, blocked shots, you know, protection at the rim, rebounds, and someone to get Aubrey and Mikayla open off screens, she was our girl.

They did a great job. I wanted people in the game that were going to be aggressive to win the game, and we have that. We have a great group, but they were the right people for the job today.

Q. Coach, it felt like Aubrey's eight points in that 12-2 run kind of really changed the momentum of the game. For her to be a freshman in that moment and just keep her poise and composure, can you just talk about her in her freshman year?

SHEA RALPH: It was only a matter of time for her to do what she did today, because that's who she is. I've been really -- it's been really cool to watch her develop this year as a coach, as a basketball player. The way that she plays is free and confident and fun to watch.

She has fun playing basketball. You know, just you heard her grandfather say "have fun," that's what makes her great. She doesn't get too high or too low, but she is a

freshman. Today was a tough game for her in a lot of ways. I know she learned a lot. I can't wait to see what that looks like. You can't skip steps.

So think about the way that that kid has grown this year and the expectation. You guys probably had no idea who she was. Most of the country didn't when she came here, but they do now. She's only going to keep getting better.

Q. I know you mentioned just now saying that you can't skip steps, and that was for Aubrey. How important was getting to this step? I know you've won national championships before, so what does this do in terms of going to you to that goal?

SHEA RALPH: It's the next step. It's hard to get here and lose, right? I just told the players before we came in here, I was in college for a long time, so I can't remember exactly which year this was. It was the year before we won the championship. 1998, '99; we lost in the Sweet 16.

I was 2 for 12, and my All American wing was 2 for 17. We lost, and the next year guess what we did. We won the championship. It fueled the fire inside of all of us that I don't know that we would have gotten had we not faced that kind of adversity.

Then playing the way that we did in that game, it sucked, it hurt, but it gave us something that we probably wouldn't have gotten otherwise, and that was the program's second only national championship when I was there.

So I feel like this program is on the cusp of doing something really special, and this is just a step that we have to take in that direction. What I'm hearing from my players already is next year is going to be even more special.

Q. I just wondered your take on Hannah Hidalgo's knack for steals. Is there anything unique about the way she does that?

SHEA RALPH: She's just a special player. I think you have to respect how hard she plays all the time. You know, there's always a takeaway when you play against a player like that who plays so hard on both sides of the ball. I said it yesterday. She's like a free safety out there. You know, just kind of looking around, and as soon as she sees your eyes on a person, she's going to go get the ball. It's impressive.

Hopefully our players not only learned a little bit about how we can take better care of the ball, but also, that's the kind of effort you need to win games like this.

So I got to give her and them credit, but she gave the effort that was needed to win the game for her team on both sides of the ball, and kudos to her. She's a great player.

Q. Obviously you have already been named a finalist or gotten numerous awards for Coach of the Year, but recently some other members of your coaching staff have won awards. Kevin I think was named -- he got an award the other day. Can you just speak to the impact that your coaching staff has had to get you to this point and what it's meant to you to be on this journey not only with your players, but also with them by your side?

SHEA RALPH: My coaching staff is my family, right? Sorry, I'm trying not to ugly cry. These are kids. Kevin was a kid when I met him, and he won Assistant Coach of the Year this year. There are members of my staff who could win awards every year. My husband came here with me and left a Division I head coaching job to come build something special. We hired people that we have worked with or coached or known or built relationships over the course of the time here, and they've stayed with me the entire time through some really tough times, right? For better or worse.

I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but look across the country and you don't see that a lot. You don't see that, the consistency within our staff, the commitment they give every single day, the way they show up for me.

I'm the one that gets to sit up here and talk to you guys and I get nominated for awards and all those things, but I'm not great at anything if I don't have great people around me. Our leadership, my assistant coaches, our support staff, my players. You don't have -- you're not a great coach without any of that, so I appreciate it and I'm honored, but they should be the ones getting the awards.

I'm the one that's in charge of making sure we're moving the ship in the right direction to clear the path for my players and my staff and I love that job, but it's a true family and team effort. It starts from the very top, our AD is sitting here, all the way down.

So I've been able to invest in my staff, time, resources. I've been able to invest in our student-athletes so that we could all be here, but they're so meaningful not just in wins and losses in basketball, but all the things we want to do at Vanderbilt so that we can maximize the true full potential of the women that we're working with and the program that we're in charge of.

Q. Coach, there were some parallels or similarities to the Oregon loss from last year with being down double

digits, a really remarkable comeback, and losing at the end. Your messaging after that, I wonder what you learned from that loss and kind of how you processed it last season, if that's going to help you going forward with this one?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I mean, I can see the context of the question, but I think it's completely different that we're in the Sweet 16 this year. We hadn't won a tournament game except for being in the first four.

I also think that the people that we have are different. There were a lot of things about this team. You know, we didn't get down by 20. They were locked in on the bench. They were locked in in the locker room. We just didn't play well.

So I think that what happened last year had fueled us to put ourselves in a better position this year to do more things, and honestly, we had such a great season because of the way that my players came together after last year, because of how much harder we worked, how much more together we played, how much more unified we were as a group.

We just started off the game poorly this year -- this tournament, right now, this game that we played today. We didn't play well. We were throwing the ball all over the place. We were giving up wide-open layups. We weren't executing offensively.

Those things, it's going to be hard for you to win a game at this time in the year if you don't do those things. That's just the reality of the game of basketball.

From season to season, your teams are going to change. You're going to learn lessons, but I think all of that starts in practice. We have talked about that all year. We've gotten better, but it's still not good enough. We've got to do a better job in practice preparing so that we can't be stopped, so that we keep our composure, so that no matter how people play us on defense, that we can still get open shots, and we don't give up the ball. That we know is not a winning -- the winning edge for us.

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