

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Final - NC State vs Texas

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Moda Center

NC State Wolfpack Coach Wes Moore Aziaha James River Baldwin

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

NC State - 76, Texas - 66

THE MODERATOR: Once again, NC State with the 76-66 win over Texas. Joining us in the Regional Championship post-game press conference, Head Coach Wes Moore along with student-athletes River Baldwin and Most Outstanding Player of the tournament, Aziaha James. Coach, congratulations on the win and advancing to the Final Four. Begin with your opening statements, and then we'll open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

WES MOORE: Well, I'm just so proud of these young ladies. Again, it's a long season. We had a little stretch, February. We lost a couple of road games, and I think everybody thought we were going to fall apart or whatever. And these players just kept working, stuck together. I mean, they're such -- the chemistry's so good. They really, you know, pull for each other.

And when you get in a situation like this, that really pays off. And I would like to also say congrats to Coach Schafer and his team. To lose a player like he did with Harmon at their point guard early in the year and to still make it this deep in the tournament says a lot about Vic and his players.

But, like I said, I couldn't be prouder of this group. We've had somebody step up, it seems like every game, different people. Aziaha stepped up big time in both these games. And, of course, River's been a rock in there for us all year. So proud of both of these players.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open the floor now for questions from our student-athletes.



Q. First of all, Aziaha, did you know about the three-point line discrepancy thing?

AZIAHA JAMES: No, we were just there to play our game. That's it.

Q. So given how well you shot, would it have mattered with the three-point line?

AZIAHA JAMES: Not at all.

WES MOORE: They don't shoot at that thing anyway, so it don't matter. I tell them to move it in every day.

Q. River, a pretty good one-day delayed birthday present. How are you able to just sort of bring your team home in the fourth quarter when they really zoned in on Aziaha?

RIVER BALDWIN: I mean, yeah, super frustrated in the first half when they called that second foul in the first quarter. Having to sit for so long, knowing my team needed me in the second half to close out the game and just being that inside presence whenever they shut down the perimeter. But, yeah, you can't guard all five of us when we all average double figures.

Q. This question is for Aziaha James. I saw you in an interview online. And the woman asked you, "You shot well against Stanford. Can you do it again?" And you, without hesitation, said "Yes." Where do you get that confidence from in your shot? It's like you've been playing in this gym before.

AZIAHA JAMES: You know, I just keep my head up, you know? You never know what can happen. I just kept going. My confidence was going as the shots were going in. So later in the game, you know, they just kept hitting for me. So I just kept shooting.

Q. Aziaha, to follow up on that. So, I mean, are you shooting and you're thinking, like, dang, give me the ball? I cannot miss. Have you shot that well before ever in your life? I mean, you were perfect from three



in the first half.

AZIAHA JAMES: Yeah, I shot well, but I don't want to say "Give me the ball" because all my teammates can score. I just allow the game to come to me. It did well for me.

Q. What does it mean for both of you to get this program back to a level that it hasn't been since -- I mean, were you guys born when it last went to the Final Four?

AZIAHA JAMES: No. No.

Q. So what does it mean for you to be part of that history?

RIVER BALDWIN: I think it's just an honor to be part of a legacy that is NC State women's basketball. I didn't start here, but I feel like I've been here my whole career. I really found a home here.

So to be a part of the first Final Four for Coach Moore, I thank him for taking a chance on me and taking me into this program. I've loved every second of it.

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. It means a lot to me as well. I wouldn't pick any other coach to play with. It's been 26 years since the Wolfpack brought it home. So it's good to light it up for Hillsborough.

Q. Aziaha, Vic Schafer was just in here and told us the transition defense was at the top of their whiteboard coming into this game. How were you and Saniya able to create so much out of transition against them trying to take that away?

AZIAHA JAMES: You know, we're unstoppable when it comes to transition, as Coach Moore says. So that was our go-to every time, and it was just working good for us.

Q. Hey, Aziaha. You were a freshman on this program two years ago. You came this close. You can't see it, but I've got the two fingers for "close" together. Just that so, so close for the Final Four, what does it mean, two years removed now, after the disappointment from last year, y'all are in the Final Four? You got over that hump. What does it mean to be a part of that?

AZIAHA JAMES: It feels so good to be a part of that since my freshman year. It shows a lot about the Wolfpack. Just shows a lot about myself, just never giving up. People didn't know my name my freshman year, but you know my name now, so you see how I've grown (laughter).

Q. River, I was just wondering, when the foul calls

maybe aren't necessarily going your way, what's the key to staying ready and staying prepared so you can come in in the fourth quarter and make such a huge impact like you did today?

RIVER BALDWIN: I think whenever you get in early foul trouble like that, it's easy to check out. So just staying locked in mentally and knowing that when your time comes and you hit the court again, you need to step up for your teammates and not be caught up in whatever's going on in your own head.

Q. And then for both players, I'm sure part of the reason you chose NC State was to play in games like this. When you committed to NC State, River obviously is a transfer and Aziaha out of high school, is this a height you saw the program reaching while you were here?

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. I saw this program reaching -- the sky is the limit for this program. We're going to keep going, you know. Since high school, they were doing good. So I felt like I could be a part of this program and make it better. So, yeah.

RIVER BALDWIN: Yeah. I think this is part of what I was trying to achieve entering the portal and just looking for a competitive program. And just looking to play competitive basketball with teammates that support me and coaches that trust me.

Q. River, Aziaha's obviously had a lot of big games for you guys this year. How would you describe what she was like, what she did for you guys this weekend, these two games that you have here?

RIVER BALDWIN: I've seen a lot of growth in Zaza since even the beginning of the year, she's really stepped up as a leader. And we feed off of her energy. So just the growth in taking smart shots and being a reliable defender has been great to see throughout the season. And as y'all saw this weekend, she is that girl. (Laughter).

Q. This is for either player. Cleveland is a little closer to Raleigh than Portland is. How much are y'all looking forward to how much the fans can make -- how many fans can make that trip up to Cleveland for the Final?

AZIAHA JAMES: Oh, we came all the way out here and you see Wolfpack fans came out here, so just imagine -- just imagine what's about to happen next. So we just love the Wolfpack fans and how much love they show us. You know, it's our family, it's our friends. It's about to be big for us.



Q. I thought this might be the last question. I was just going to ask, are you going to go back to the locker room immediately and turn on the men's game?

AZIAHA JAMES: Oh, for sure. We're rooting for our men. Yes, we are definitely rooting for our men.

Q. They're down four right now.

AZIAHA JAMES: It's okay. We've still got a lot of time left.

THE MODERATOR: And that was not the last question.

Q. This is for River Baldwin. When you were at Florida State, you weren't a real scorer or what have you. And you expanded your game here. You were MVP in the St. Thomas. You scored 26 points in that game. In the fourth quarter you had 14 points. What drove you -- I mean, I know that Aziaha found you a couple of times in the lane. But you hit the free throw jump shot. I mean, you just were -- tell me about that development from when your offensive game.

RIVER BALDWIN: I think a lot of it just comes having teammates that trust you and coaches that have confidence in you. And just feeding off their energy, they have given me confidence in myself.

Q. You guys were picked to finish eighth in the ACC. Now you're going to the Final Four. How does that feel?

AZIAHA JAMES: It feels amazing. You know, people doubted us, and we didn't care what the media had to say. We didn't care what anybody had to say. We showed up on the court every time, and we proved who we were. But, yeah, it means a lot.

RIVER BALDWIN: Yeah. Sorry.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Congratulations. Thank you for your time. And best of luck in the Final Four.

AZIAHA JAMES: I want to shoutout our scout team. They got us here, too.

RIVER BALDWIN: For sure.

THE MODERATOR: All right. The floor is now open for questions for Coach Moore.

Q. Coach, I can't really tell with your hat on, but you said Elvis might make an appearance today.

WES MOORE: They didn't get me bad today. Hey, I've been waiting a long time to put one of these on. I couldn't wait any longer.

Q. I'm just wondering your emotions right now, what you guys have accomplished today.

WES MOORE: Yeah, just a flood of emotions and thoughts. I think of Kay Yow, 34 years at NC State, and took this program to a Final Four in '98. I think the of the players two years ago that were a double-overtime game away from being in this exact spot. So I think of them. And then I think of these players, again, overcoming all the doubts and questions and just -- Final Four, y'all.

I mean, this is my 35th year as a head coach, and it's amazing, you know, very emotional, on Easter Sunday. Unbelievable.

Q. Wes, you have two kids who were on the roster today that were on the roster two years ago. Aziaha's one of them. But she didn't play in that game. And she said, "No one knew my name." There's a lot of kids that go into the portal that get -- that don't want to wait. Just what was it like to watch her have this performance on this stage, knowing that she decided to stick around and believe in you and believe in this program?

WES MOORE: Yeah, it's a great point. It's just really hard. Again, I get it. I mean, it's our job, but I'm used to kids coming in. It's a big jump from high school.

These kids, freshmen were playing high school ball, and now they're on this stage playing against players that will be in the WNBA next year. And it's a big jump.

And you hope that they'll be patient, because, you know, I notice all the teams. Early in the year you're playing a lot of freshmen. And then when you get to this time of year, your depth is kind of shrunk down a little bit. Your rotation, I guess I should say, is shrunk down. And it's hard on them.

And you hope that they'll stick around. You know, they're going to be better a year from now. They're going to play more a year from now at your place. But they may decide, "I can't wait. I'm going to jump." So it is different.

I'm used to seeing kids develop. And Aziaha is an unbelievable example. Her freshman year, great player out of high school. I mean, big-time player. But freshman year, kind of had to work her way in. Last year she got more time, probably should have got even more, if I hadn't have been so adamant about playing veterans.



And now here she is, reaping the benefits. Yeah, it's really awesome. She's worked so hard over the summer. And like I said, her confidence. She used to maybe hang her head if things didn't go well, if a shot didn't go in, if I got on her. But now she is a woman. And she handles adversity and keeps coming back.

Q. Coach, since you mentioned doing this kind of for the 2022 players, or at least thinking of them, have you heard from any of them this week?

WES MOORE: Some of the former players? Yeah. Not so much from that team here recently, but, yeah. I mean, again, we've got our GA was on that team, Kayla Jones, great player. Same thing, her freshman year, she didn't play much. Heck, her sophomore year she probably didn't play a ton, and then she ended up starting for us three years and being on that team that went to the Elite 8. She got drafted.

Answering your question, this time of year I'm not real good at communicating. My sisters are probably wondering why I'm not answering. But you're just so engulfed in you win one, you get ready for the next one. And such a challenge.

So when the dust settles, we'll have plenty of time to maybe savor it a little bit more with people you care about.

Q. Early this season you said a couple times something to the effect of, we're going to need the freshmen to step up with depth and all of that. Zoe, obviously, played a ton today. Maddie played a little bit. Just overall with the entire bench, how proud of them are you of how they've bought into their roles this season and improved?

WES MOORE: Yeah, like I said, it's tough on freshmen. Really, our depth with our freshmen class. And so, again, when you get in this situation, sometimes you go with the veterans that have been there a little bit more. But, yeah, they've kept great attitudes.

Like I said, they really cheer for each other, pull for each other, happy for each other when they have success. And that's pretty remarkable trait to have. And it's made it work. You know, if they were totally into themselves and upset with their role, we wouldn't be here right now.

And, again, we're excited about that class, and hopefully they're going to grow with us and keep this tradition going like Aziaha did.

Q. With the three-point line situation, which one was correct, and have the lines been painted like this all

week?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I don't mind now. Again, you know, we were -- the line on the Texas bench's end was correct. The line on our end was probably a little bit short.

And at first Vic was hesitant about it, and then he finally said, you know -- I didn't want to wait an hour or something to play the game. I was ready to get going. But Vic probably figured out, you know what? This line down here is what we're used to. That line down there isn't.

And if you'll look, I think we shot the ball better on the other end both games, because that's the normal line. But I'm not going to blame it on that. I mean, these kids, like I said, they shoot so far behind it sometimes nowadays, who knows where the line is?

You know, it is an unusual situation. But, like I said, I don't know that it was an advantage or disadvantage, either way. We both played a half on each end.

Q. To your knowledge, have they been painted like this this entire time we've been here?

WES MOORE: They didn't paint them overnight.

Q. I was there with you in 2022 in that Regional Final in Connecticut and just the disappointment that the entire program and everyone felt at that time. You have to tell me how good it feels to be in this position now, in contrast to where you were two years ago in that Regional Final.

WES MOORE: Yeah. When you lose a game in double overtime as a coach, you second-guess everything you did for that 50 minutes of that game. And you look back and think, if I just would have done this, we'd have gone to the Final Four.

And I didn't know if I'd ever get another chance, you know? I know I'm fairly young, but, you know, it's tough to get there. And so it's just amazing, you know, it really is. I mean, that's your goal. That's every player's goal, every coach's goal. When they start their career, when they start every season, is to ultimately get to the Final Four.

And I don't think we'll be satisfied. I think we'll still be hungry. But, you know, we're going to really enjoy this plane ride home. So it's good.

Whatever y'all want to do. I'm fine. I don't think we're going anywhere for a while. Our flight's not till 6:00, so...

Q. Coach, for every game of this tournament, your

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team is getting out to these leads and then kind of just maintaining them throughout the entire second half, it really seems. In your opinion, what is the team doing well to respond to runs from opponents in the fourth quarter and really not let the game get too close at the end?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I knew Texas was going to make some runs. And, obviously, they whittled it down there some. But, again, when you've got guards that can handle it, can get downhill and attack, it makes it really hard for people to try to pressure you and catch up.

I noticed they didn't really press us as much as they normally do, and I think that says a lot about our guards. And they just felt like they didn't want to speed us up even more.

But, yeah. I mean, again, both these games, you know. Obviously, the Stanford game, we were down 10 at halftime. This game they made a run in the second half. But these kids just like to play, and hopefully we can continue to take care of the ball. I think we've done a better job of that. And when you do that, it's hard for people to make runs.

Q. Wes, what do you think has led to Aziaha playing her best basketball at this moment in the stage, you know, at this point in her career?

WES MOORE: Heck if I know. I wish I'd have bottled it up sooner. Again, her confidence, it's like a coming-out party. I think she, right now, probably the goal looks a little bigger. And, obviously, we're going to her. I think all these players. River, over in the Virgin Islands, we told her, you're it. We're going to get you the ball. We're going to ride you. And then with Aziaha, Saniya, we just have stressed, we're going to put you in situations where you can make plays. And, dang, they made plays.

Q. So, Wes, Aziaha scored 25 in the second half against Stanford and then 21 in the first half. So what do you need to do to get her to score 20 in each game?

WES MOORE: Oh, are you kidding me? You're going to go there? All right. Here I go again. Yeah, my fault, y'all. No.

You know, it's funny because then River Baldwin kind of took over in the fourth quarter there. And so I just think it's a matter of the matchups and who's hot. Again, Aziaha was coming off the big second half against Stanford, and that probably gave her a lot of confidence. She probably really likes this arena. I know I do.

But, obviously, the other team knows she scored 20-something, whatever, in the first half. And so I'm sure they made adjustments and tried to make it a little bit harder on her.

Q. Wes, you do know that the Final Four is here in six years, if you hang around long enough, you might get a chance to come back to it. Pregame, were you just in your pregame prep when you got word about what was going on with the floor, and then kind of what was the -- what happened from there?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I wish I hadn't had known, to be honest with you. But like I say, it was a tough call because it is a little bit of difference. But you're also, like I said, looking at over an hour delay before they could get here.

You're also losing probably the ABC window. That's a big deal to be on ABC. We've been fortunate to be on it a couple of times the last couple of years. But it's a big deal.

Like I said, I think players are used to shooting pretty far behind the line anyway. And so, yeah, but, definitely, it did take you out of your routine a little bit. And I was kind of late being where I was supposed to be with the players and all. But it worked out, so everything's good.

Q. On that same topic, just how disappointing was it for you to be having to deal with a situation like that and having a court that wasn't right going into an Elite 8 game?

WES MOORE: I couldn't go there. I had to worry about the game. Like I said, I was worried about if our players were going to have to wait an hour to play. I like the fact we could jump out there and play the game. And, again, I don't think it affected the game, the outcome. Both teams played on it for a half.

If it would have gone to overtime, we might have a complaint. But as it was, it was equal for both teams. These kids have handled different stuff all year. So, hey, they're good.

Q. Change courts halfway through overtime if that had happened?

WES MOORE: Yeah.

Q. I'm sure you want to celebrate right now and not think about South Carolina. But any first thoughts on kind of the challenge in taking on an undefeated team? And does having played a home and home with them not that long ago, but entirely different rosters, help at all in the prep?

WES MOORE: Yeah. I mean, again, it gives you a little bit of confidence. We were able to split with them. You know, they're a great, great team. Obviously, the best team in the country. But you're not playing a four-out-of-seven series. You're playing one game, okay?

So we've just got to find a way to win one game against them, and it's going to be a big challenge. Obviously, I've seen them on TV quite a bit. I'm sure when I get on that plane in a little while, I'll probably exhale for a minute or two. But we've got a pretty long flight. So at some point I'll be watching them and trying to get ready.

But, hey, right now, you know, you could tell me we're playing the Trail Blazers, and I'd feel okay. We're in the Final Four. Bring them on. Oh, come on. Come on. Come on. (Laughter) Clyde Drexler. Bring him back. Bill Walton. Bill Walton.

THE MODERATOR: So you want the all-time Blazers against NC State?

WES MOORE: Yeah, against South Carolina, it might be good.

THE MODERATOR: Give Lloyd Neal a call, and let's talk.

Q. Coach, I know I said I wasn't going to ask you a question. You talk about freshmen, and you have two good freshmen that you play and that you have trust in. Talk about Maddie Cox and Zoe Brooks coming off the bench as a freshman and the way she played in this tournament.

WES MOORE: Yeah. You know, amazing. Of course, we knew Zoe was really good coming out of high school. I look at our stat sheet. Even with Aziaha going off and with River having an unbelievable fourth quarter, we've got five people in double figures, and that's what's been our strength all year long.

So Zoe makes a big difference when she can come in and provide us -- I mean, that gives you three guards that can really get downhill, you know?

And so -- and then Maddie Cox, she's from Texas, so I'm sure this was kind of special for her. But, you know, all other freshmen. Again, we've kind of tightened our rotation up. But it's a good group. And hopefully they'll be patient and be ready when their time comes.

Q. Coach, obviously, this town and this venue's going to be hosting the Final Four in 2030. I'm just curious if you have overall thoughts on the arena, the town

hosting you?

WES MOORE: I love it. You know, I hadn't been here in a long time. I came out here and did a home visit with Coach Yow, so that tells you it was in the mid-'90s. I flew out on a red-eye, visited the kid at school, did a home visit, and took a red-eye back out. I guess I flew out early in the morning and then I took a red-eye out that night, so pretty brutal. Everybody's been unbelievable. Fortunate we have police escorts. Those guys were awesome, the hotel, the arena. Everyone has been so hospitable and go out of their way and take care of us. I do think definitely this will be a great place for it.

Again, I know there's a lot of questions about the two sites, you know, instead of four sites. But I love Portland. Yesterday I was able to get out and walk a little bit to go grab me something to eat. It's a great place. So I'm all for it.

Q. Just got a follow-up. Who was the player you were recruiting?

WES MOORE: You know what? That's horrible. I don't remember. Hey, y'all, when they don't come, they didn't come! So they kind of become a tramp at that point, and I forget about them. Okay? That's a joke. That's a joke. (Laughter). But no. No. Maybe that wasn't the word I should have used, but anyway...

I really don't remember where she ended up going. She didn't come to NC State, though. And I'm sure she had a great career.

THE MODERATOR: And with that, Coach, thank you very much. Congratulations and best of luck in the Final Four.

WES MOORE: All right. Thank y'all.

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