

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Virginia vs TCU

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Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

Virginia Cavaliers

Coach Amaka

Agugua-Hamilton

Kymora Johnson

Sa'Myah Smith

Paris Clark

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach Amaka Agugua-Hamilton from the Virginia women's basketball team.

Q. Coach Walz this morning said that Kymora Johnson is one of the most underrated point guards in the country and she hasn't gotten the credit she deserved until she did what she did against Iowa. Do you think she gets enough credit nationally? How have you enjoyed this more recent attention she's gotten as well?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: I think she's one of the best players in the country. I've said that for the last couple of years. So I think she deserves more national recognition, for sure. And I think sometimes you've just got to be on the big stage to get it. She's doing a great job of seizing that moment.

I think she's been leading our team, obviously, but people are starting to know more about her story, too. She's a great player. She can score, I said, at all three levels. She can facilitate. She can play defense. She can rebound. She does it all at the point guard spot.

But she has a story to her, too. She's a great person. She's a high-character kid. She's selfless, she gives, she's a great leader.

I think right now she's getting that moment and just the



spotlight she deserves. And I think it's just going to continue to grow from here.

Q. Coach Staley mentioned earlier that she's checked in a little bit, happy to see Virginia return to their glory days, so to speak. What's that relationship been like for you, and how weird is it to sort of be in the same competitive bracket as South Carolina with that?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: It's amazing. I have tremendous respect for her and everything she's done in her career and just done in the game and elevated our game and brought more notoriety to it.

But I knew her before I got to UVA, but I would say we became friends once I got here. She reached out to me the day, actually, I got hired. Was really proud and wanted to support her along with a lot of the alums.

This is her school. This is where she started her basketball career. Learned a lot. Grew a lot. She says that all the time publicly. She's very passionate about Virginia and very passionate about the women's basketball program.

She's excited to see us back in the Sweet 16, back in the Big Dance. She's been nothing but supportive.

It would be awesome to, if we take care of business, meet her in the Sweet 16. I think that would be a great moment for UVA, Wahoo Nation. Tremendous respect for everything she's done. She's been a really good friend and a really good supporter. I appreciate her a lot.

Q. Did Coach send you a piece of the net years ago when she sent it out to a bunch of Black coaches?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yes, when I was at Missouri State. I still have it on my desk.

Q. And the second part is just what does it mean to get Virginia back to this round of Sweet 16 for the first time in I think it's 26 years?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: It means a lot. Part of the reason I wanted to come to Virginia, when was growing up,



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middle school days and things like that, Virginia was in the forefront of the country nationally. You know, Final Fours, obviously Debbie Ryan, who has been traveling with us. I just have tremendous respect for her.

But then Dawn Staley was playing and other players -- and I mean there's a whole laundry list of players -- Tammi Reiss and Wendy Palmer -- all of them. There's so many of them.

I knew where this program had been. And when I accepted this job, I hadn't followed it in recent years. I knew it wasn't in a good spot. But my vision of Virginia women's basketball was all that. It was the championships -- because I'm a native of Virginia. I knew this program, where it's been and where I could get it back to.

So being a part of the group that's getting it there, obviously leading this group, these young women who are leaving their legacy, is just a blessing. It's an honor to be a part of that. Historically, it's a rich program with history.

So I told our team in the summertime that we had a chance to leave a legacy this year. We had a chance to do something special. This is before the season even started.

So to see it all come to fruition -- and obviously we didn't want to just be satisfied with just a Sweet 16 -- we are still hungry for more. But to see it all come together, it fills me up. It truly, truly fills me up. And I'm just happy to see all the joy and smiles and happy to see them just living their dream.

Q. Kind of a similar question to the last one. But from your perspective, from your point of view, what makes a run like this so unique?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Well, I think this one is unique because of the fashion that it happened in. Obviously being a 10 seed in a play-in game and being able to win that game and then take down the first-round game, second round.

I think obviously Iowa, that was a 2 seed on their home court in front of 15,000 fans.

So I think the way that this has all come together makes it unique. But, like I said, I've always believed in this group. We've had some ups and downs through the course of the season. We've had a lot of adversity, a lot of adversity that people know about, some that you don't know about and some that we keep in-house.

But there's been a lot of things that has derailed this team a little bit, but then we got back on track. And up and

down, things like that.

We've been a good team all year but we're starting to click at the right time. I think once we had that early exit out of the ACC Tournament and had about a week and a half or whatever it was before Selection Sunday, that's when I really challenged this group. It wasn't a time where we went off and they went their separate ways. It was a time where we came together.

And I was hard on them. I was hard on all of them. I was hard on Kymora. I was hard on the team. I pushed them. I challenged them. We also did some team bonding, too, to come together.

But that was an opportunity for us to grow. And we did. We came together. We got better on the court. We got closer. Our camaraderie came together. Our synergy came together. And when our name was called, we were ready to go.

Q. I was wondering if you could speak on the resiliency of this team, to go from the First Four game against Arizona State that's tight, to winning in overtime against Georgia, to double-overtime against Iowa. Are we going to see triple overtime tomorrow? The results of this group, to keep going and keep playing through all this adversity and everything you guys have gone through.

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: I mean, that's what it's all about. And that's what we talk about in our program. One of the things we talk about a lot is culture and culture wins.

And so who are we? You know, what kind of group are we? Our culture is built on so many things -- love, respect, loyalty, camaraderie, synergy, selflessness, giving, integrity -- all of that stuff. And so who are we when our backs are against the wall and we're putting in adverse situations?

One of the things that I talk about with our players anyway, just after life after basketball, that's a big part of it, is you have to be resilient in life. You have to be able to persevere through adversity. You have to be able to handle the hard times and smile in the face of adversity, things like that.

So we try to create as much adversity in practice as we can so that they can get ready for the moment in games when it happens throughout the course of the season. But there's times where that doesn't always happen the way we want it to.

But if they're learning the overall message of that and pushing through and fighting together and things like that,

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they'll be ready for life after basketball.

But, I guess, in the context of what your question is, we were able to carry those lessons we learned through the course of the season into those games in the NCAA Tournament. So when we were faced with that adversity or other teams punching back, or we go down -- we go down, we went down by nine in the Iowa game -- or whatever it was, we weren't rattling.

We had extreme poise. Everybody was locked in in the huddles. Everybody understood, okay, we've been here before. We've had quite a few overtime games this year. And we were able to just come together and stay together and have fun while we do it too.

Q. Curious, what does it mean to you and this team to be the first double-digit ranked team to be in the Sweet 16 since 2022? And a two-parter, how would you categorize this kind of remarkable run that you've had during March Madness? We hear Cinderella story, underdog story. I'm curious from your own words how you would categorize it?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: I mean, for me, all the glory always goes to God. I'm a God-fearing woman. And that is in the forefront of my life.

So for me, it's God. I'm just thankful that He chose me. And I'm thankful this was part of the purpose, part of the reason I was drawn to Virginia and why He chose Virginia for me. So to me this was all kind of in the plan. That's just what I believe.

I just give a lot of praise and thankful and extreme gratitude just to be in this position, to have the opportunity to lead these young people and impact their lives, because that's the big reason why I coach. It's just equipping them for life through the game of basketball, which is the vessel that we do this through.

So to be a part of this and to kind of etch your name in history is amazing. It's a blessing. But it's also what we talked about with this group.

It's definitely what we talked about with Kymora Johnson when she committed to us without us even coaching a game. She committed to a program that was coming off a season before we got there of 5-22 and dead last in the ACC.

She believed in the vision. We talked about the vision. We talked about this moment. And I didn't know when it was going to come. She didn't know when it was going to come. It was just kind of leading with blind faith. But we

talked about that.

And every other kid that's committed, we talked about that, being part of something that's special, bigger than yourself because they see the banners every day. They're in our gym. They know, okay, this program was elite at some point, right? And why not be part of bringing it back.

So that's been the message all season. And to be here now just to watch the joy on their faces, like I said, has just been amazing.

Q. How much did you know about the precedent or the history of double-digit seeds reaching this point, specifically before you went on this run with your team this season?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: I didn't. I didn't know. I've been in the NCAA Tournament as a head coach obviously before but even just through the course of my years coaching multiple times, many times, and I guess I didn't really know that.

But I don't really focus on that. It's funny because I said this to, I think, media after the Georgia game. I wasn't focused -- everybody was saying upset, upset. I think they were a 7 seed. We were obviously a 10 seed. But I wasn't even focused on that.

I didn't even know. I really didn't know. That's just because that's how I prepare my teams. I'm very, very confident in what we can do. And if we do the things that I'm asking you to do and the things I know we can do, I'm always confident that we can win any game.

So even when I was at my last stint at Missouri State, we didn't focus on seeds. We were a 5 seed one year, the year we went to the Sweet 16. We didn't focus on seeds. I just never do. I just focus on us, how good can we be if we're locked in.

So when everybody was upset, this, that, I was just kind of like, well, we won the game, let's move on. And even going into the Iowa game, in the locker room, I don't care what seed they are. I don't even know what seed they are.

I don't pay attention to that stuff. I really don't. Because if we are really locked in on what we're trying to do, and the message that I'm trying to get across, we're going to be good. You know?

We have everything we need. We've got the dynamic point guard. We've got guards. We've got bigs. We have all that stuff. If it comes together, it clicks, we're a special team.

I'm not focused on other people. And obviously we have the game plan. We're always going to have a scout and we're always going to be prepared on what they do. As far as just how social media hypes up the 2 seed, 1 seed, whatever it is, we don't get into that.

I just didn't really know, honestly, until afterwards. Usually my SID tells us all that stuff.

Q. Do you have a favorite NCAA Tournament upset of all time?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: That I was involved?

Q. Even one you were involved in or just one that you've seen throughout your life of watching basketball?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Well, obviously the Iowa game we just played.

Q. How about one that you weren't involved?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: One that I wasn't involved in. I don't know. There's been a lot of good ones. I don't know. I'm focused. I'm focused on what we're doing right now. You've got to ask me later on in the season when I'm not focused on us.

Q. No Cinderellas, nothing?

MIKAYLAH WILLIAMS: I've got nothing for you. It's all about us right now.

Q. I know Sa'Myah has had a really tough year off the court. I'm wondering what you've been able to see out of her recently, how she's been able to sort of come into her own and figure out her place in this program, and what her experience having had success in the NCAA Tournament has done for you guys?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: I've got one for you. NC State men, two years ago. Wasn't it two years ago, when they went to the Final Four? There you go. That was a good one.

All right, back to you.

Sa'Myah, she's been through a lot. I've talked about it a lot. Right when she got to us in May, she got on grounds in May. And she had a knee surgery. She was out the whole summer.

Then she kind of worked her way back, and then she had a

knee surgery right before the season. Missed I think eight or nine games. And then came back, played three games, was playing great, and unfortunately her mother passed away. That's been really, really rough.

She tried to start working her way through that then her grandfather passed away. She's had quite a bit of adversity. But her sisters have been right there with her and so have we just helping her work through all that.

She's the one that has the most winning experience in March, obviously, being a national champion with LSU. And so her bringing that experience and bringing what it takes to win in March has been tremendous. It's been helpful, for sure, for our group. But she's also been working through her own stuff.

I think she brings the experience but she's also needed our players to uplift her, too, and allow her to continue to fight, because there's times where it was just really rough for her.

But she said she wanted to be here for this team, for this coaching staff. And this is even before the NCAA Tournament happened.

So I'm just really happy that she's persevering, like I said, and being strong. And when she has her days where it's a hard day, we're there for her. But she's also there for the team. So it's kind of both ways.

But it's been really special for me just watching her kind of flourish.

Q. Everyone gives Kymora a lot of the headlines but I felt that the offense that Paris has given you and the defense that Romi has given you are sort of what sets the table for you guys to beat Iowa. So I'm just wondering what you've seen from both of them and just the things that they've done, more specifically, Paris on offense and Romi on defense, that have allowed you guys to make this run?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I mean, you know, so many people on our team. You never know whose night it's going to be. We're very deep. But Paris, she's been playing with extreme urgency. Probably our last 10 games or so. It's really clicked for her. Her leadership just even outside the moment, in practice. Things like that has been really good.

Paris has always been somebody that can score. She can score in so many different ways. She can defend. She's active on the ball. She guards pretty much the other best guard, usually when we're in man.

She's been doing a really good job of just taking ownership of just her role. In the Iowa game she went on an 8-0 run herself to put us right back in the game. They started to make a run. The game was slipping a little bit. She stepped up. That's what you need your seniors to do.

Romi same thing. This is her last year of eligibility. She's having so much fun, which is awesome, but she's playing with urgency as well.

She's one of the ones that's always like, let's go, let's go, no matter if the other team punches. She does whatever defensive assignment you need. She's long, athletic, a 6'3" guard. So she disturbs the other team's offense with her length and the things that she can do.

But so those two have been really complementary, obviously. And we needed them to step up, really, all year. And they've had some good games here and there. But I would say probably like the last eight to ten games they've been playing great.

Q. I'll go back to what you said about the ACC exit. I'm curious, what was the messaging in that locker room and how do you get your team back on track at that point in the season?

AMAKA AGUGUA-HAMILTON: Yeah, I mean, obviously the way we ended the regular season was disappointing. We had a three-game losing streak there. Obviously all-tournament team. But still I knew we were better than what we were performing and what we were displaying. So the ACC one was pretty -- we lost to Clemson first. We had the bye, second round.

And that was hard. I think our players were very disappointed in themselves. Obviously I was very disappointed in our performance and just our lack of togetherness. We didn't seem like we were on the same page. So I knew that if we went into the NCAA Tournament with that kind of energy and that kind of lack of, I guess, synergy and camaraderie, it would be an early exit as well.

So that week and a half that we had, it was the first couple of days were tough. It was all about toughness. It was all about being urgent. It was all about competing. It was about being together but pushing each other.

So practice was tough. And it needs to be that way. And they were kind of thriving in that environment. And then towards the middle of the week we did a lot of team bonding that forced them to come together and understand that we need everybody, the level of trust we have to have

in each other in the coaches and the game plan, all of that stuff, the focus we have to have, the execution we have to have, things like that. So we were able to kind of peel back some layers there and get better outside of, like, off the court.

And then we came back again before the Selection Sunday and then got after it on the court as well. There was a lot of growth. There was a lot of growth, basketball-wise, X and O-wise, team-wise, urgency, competing, mental, physical toughness, all that stuff. And it was needed.

So I guess those three games that we dropped were needed for us to do what we needed to do because we have talent, obviously, but it just wasn't coming together the way it should, and we were able to fix that.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the student-athletes from Virginia, Sa'Myah Smith, Kymora Johnson and Paris Clark.

Q. Coach was just mentioning the week after you guys lost in the ACC Tournament, the tough practices you had, the team bonding you had, how she really challenged you during that week. For any of you, really, what do you remember about the bonding that took place that week and what you really had to lock into?

KYMORA JOHNSON: The first thing I remember that comes to mind was when we did trust falls with each other. We had to stand up on a box. It was really tall actually. And everyone had to stand behind, one player at a time you had to get up and fall back onto each other.

It took a couple of people a lot of times to get up there. The nerves were real but we trust each other and so we all completed the task.

PARIS CLARK: I would have to say also the trust fall but I think also just the way that Coach Mox challenged us in practice and on the court. I think after the ACC Tournament game we knew that we had to come in and be better all around. So I think just being challenged on the court, just allowing us to come together as a team and have each other's back.

Q. Kymora, your coach said you believed in this vision for this team before you even got to Virginia. I'm curious, now that you're here, in Sacramento for the Sweet 16, the vision is coming to reality. What does that feel like for you?

KYMORA JOHNSON: It's unreal. It's a dream come true for sure. But this is what I came here to do. This is what

they came here to do. And seeing it come to fruition has just been amazing. Truly a blessing.

Q. Paris, I asked Coach Mox about your team's resiliency. Close games at Arizona State and an overtime game, a double-overtime game. What is it about this team that when your guys' backs were against the wall in that first weekend, you just stepped up and you made those big moments and hit the big shots? And you yourself went on an 8-0 run in that Iowa game that helped them make the comeback.

PARIS CLARK: I think just how together we are. I think in that moment, for me personally it was just wanting to be there for my team and my sisters and just doing whatever I could do to win.

But I think also, in those other games, all those overtimes, we just knew that we wanted this game, we wanted it more. And we knew that whoever fought harder and played harder was going to come out with the win.

Q. Kymora, there was a story that came out that you were kicked off the boys team in the state championship game. If that version of you knew that you would later lead your hometown team to the Sweet 16 for the first time in 20-odd years, what would they say?

KYMORA JOHNSON: I don't know. I think she would be so proud, so happy. I think that was a pivotal moment for me in my basketball journey. That was the moment that I knew I wanted to continue with basketball and lead change. Yeah, I think she'd be very proud, very happy.

Q. Mo, Jeff Walz said this morning he thinks you probably are one of the most underrated and best players in the country, and you probably didn't get enough credit but if you hadn't done what you did against Iowa you still wouldn't be getting the attention. Do you agree with that? And then how has this kind of recent media storm been? Has it been fun or has it been stressful?

KYMORA JOHNSON: It's been really fun definitely a blessing. Not a lot of people get to say that they're one of the 16 teams left playing in the tournament. A little stressful. Not too much. But I mean, I think the work shows. And for me, coming to Virginia was a part of that underdog story. And I've been counted out pretty much my whole life. A lot of stuff wasn't handed to me. I had to work for it, but you know that's what I came here to do and put Virginia back on the map. So here we are.

Q. Kymora, Caitlin Weimar had a really tough journey

coming into Virginia. Obviously she didn't know if she could play basketball anymore with her injury. But she's been a really steady presence for you guys coming off the bench just the way she's handled herself, just mentally for you guys. What have you seen from her and how much have you guys kind of leaned a little bit on her?

KYMORA JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, she's an instant spark off the bench for us. She's a great player. I know the stats don't show it this year, but she is a great player, and we knew that when she came here, that she was going to come and perform for us. Cait, she's a senior, so I know she wants to leave it all out on the court, and she's doing just that for us.

Q. I know you're really close with James Mallory. I talked to him yesterday. He wished you luck and says don't lose. That was his message. You guys grew up together, playing together when you were kids. How does that relationship kind of help each of you out, when it comes to playing basketball, playing for the same school? What kind of messages has he sent to you during this Sweet 16 run?

KYMORA JOHNSON: We grew up together. He was on that team that I was disqualified from. His dad was our coach. But that's been my dog for a long time. When he was committing, I was like, you've got to come here. It's a story. It's what we dreamed of. He's talked to me a little bit. Not much recently. But love Chance.

Q. Sa'Myah, obviously Virginia has not been to the Sweet 16 in some time, but you have been here a few times. I'm wondering what makes this experience different, and how does it feel to be able to share some NCAA Tournament success with a new program?

SA'MYAH SMITH: I think there's no other place I'd rather be doing it at right now, no other people that I'd rather be doing it with. I mean, we're making history. And it's fun when you have great people that you're around. I mean, there's just no other place that I'd rather be right now.

Q. Kymora, I can't speak on other sites, but ESPN's brackets, about 18 percent of them didn't have Virginia making it out of the first round. How do the doubters or the nonbelievers kind of fuel this group just in general?

KYMORA JOHNSON: I mean, we don't really pay attention to it that much. We're really just trying to have fun out here. But once you win one, it adds more confidence, more fuel to the fire. Once we got the first one, we're like, okay, and kept rolling from there. So, yeah.

