

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Norfolk State vs Stanford

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Stanford, California, USA

Maples Pavilion

**Norfolk State Lady Spartans**  
**Coach Larry Vickers**

**Diamond Johnson**

**Kierra Wheeler**

**Niya Fields**

Media Conference

**Q. How was the trip out and how is California? Are you acclimating? And sort of maybe take us through a little bit of your first day, when you got here, prepping and getting ready to face Stanford.**

KIERRA WHEELER: Our first day in Cali was pretty exciting. We arrived on the charter flight, and it was like a good experience for my team because we have never done that before.

Just coming to Cali, this is my second time in Cali. I was just trying to enjoy the sun and just look at the mountains. Just really get to know the area.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Same. It was nice. We landed I think about like 2:00 p.m., went to the hotel. The hotel is really nice. Just the views, like the trees and everything. You see the mountains in the back. So it was really nice. This is also my second time in Cali. So it was pretty cool.

NIYA FIELDS: This is my first time in Cali. So I was very excited. I got to see a palm tree.

And I would say the time difference definitely did hit me. I might have forgotten to turn in an assignment, but it's a great time in Cali.

**Q. Did you have to send an email to a professor or anything?**

NIYA FIELDS: Absolutely. I forgot that here it's three hours ahead -- behind. So when it was 11:59 here it was



2:59 a.m. over there. So I was like, sorry for the late email. I forgot about the time zone, can I have an extension please? It's already done. But it all worked out.

**Q. They said yes, and they were understanding. What class was that?**

NIYA FIELDS: It's for my student-teaching class. I have to submit lessons every week.

**Q. How do you look at the match-up, ladies? Stanford is kind of imposing in the paint and has some shooters. And I know, Diamond, you will present a challenge for them on the perimeter defense as well. Maybe sort of take us through the match-up?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Obviously Stanford is a pretty good team. They had a lot of success over these past years. So it's nice to go up against a team like that. We just came up here to compete and play for 40 minutes.

We know it's going to be a tough game, but we just have to go out there, give it our all. Like you said, they've got good bigs and outside shooters. We have to be real disciplined, be smart, rebound the ball well.

KIERRA WHEELER: Obviously Stanford has like a lot of success in the past, and we just are really getting into the scene for everybody. So we're just honestly trying to stay disciplined, stick to our game plan and bring our energy.

NIYA FIELDS: Absolutely. Stanford's a great program. And we're honestly just ready to compete, 40 minutes. We don't really have much to lose. We're just ready to play basketball, honestly.

**Q. What are some of the things about Stanford on the court that stand out to you that you feel you need to be ready for individually for each other?**

KIERRA WHEELER: For me, I would have to say controlling the glass and just their presence in the paint is going to be a big thing to control because I'm one of our primary rebounders, so just seeing their wing spans and getting a good box-out.



DIAMOND JOHNSON: I would say rebounding as well and defending the 3-point line. They've got a good inside game, but they also have shooters. So we have to kind of stay disciplined and really follow the scout and stay disciplined.

**Q. When you attack the basket against a team with shot blockers like Cameron Brink, and even Kiki can block shots too, how do you just stay focused on not letting them necessarily distract what you're trying to do but just keep going with the game plan?**

KIERRA WHEELER: Honestly, we know that they're going to challenge us at the rim. That's what they're good at. All week we've been practicing on strong finishes.

Even if they get a block, you can always go back and get it. It's nothing that -- we're just trying to be really unfazed by their presence down there because we don't want to stop attacking or being aggressive just because they're shot blockers. Things will happen and we'll be able to recover from it.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Like she said, we've got to be aggressive. We've got to stay aggressive. Can't be scared to go in the paint. Hopefully when you go in the paint you attack her, you're going to get fouls called. You might get your shot blocked too.

We just have to be really aggressive and create that space and also where they can't block the shot.

NIYA FIELDS: Absolutely, I agree. Continue attacking the paint and drawing those foul calls that open up, and it will just make our game easier. So, not to let it phase us, go up strong and play ball.

**Q. Once Diamond gets rolling on the perimeter, that really opens things up the way you like to play, perhaps?**

NIYA FIELDS: Yes, absolutely. Diamond has a great shooting ability. So they have to respect her at the 3-point line. So it just makes things easier for us knowing that they have to step out and put a hand up for her.

**Q. Last season the team that won the conference championship, Howard had to do a play-in game, but you all don't have to do that. Can you maybe reflect on that and maybe being fortunate enough to not have to play a game before getting into the 64-team?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I think last year we were just stepping on the scene. I think it was our first time in 21

years of being here. So we got, of course, the 16 seed.

I think this year, after a lot of people are familiar with our name and our game and us dominating the MEAC and also dominating outside of conference play as well.

Just us showing up two times in a row, I think it got us the opportunity to get that 15 seed.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Like she said, just being more familiar with Norfolk State. And, like you said, they won last year but they still ended up being a 16 seed. This year we had a different goal of we have to, like she said, dominate the MEAC in order for people to see us as a good team. And we got the 15 seed. It was pretty nice to see.

NIYA FIELDS: I'd also like to add that I also think that Dawn Staley's comment last year also helped with that as well, us not being a 16 seed again, but also gaining a position of being a 15 seed this year.

**Q. How much did you learn from last year's experience playing South Carolina?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I think I learned a lot from playing South Carolina -- Aliyah Boston, Kamilla Cardoso. They have similar length to Cameron Brink and Kiki. So I think that prepared me to really know what it's going to be like down there and to be prepared to have a fight because it's two dominant posts once again.

**Q. How much did you learn from playing South Carolina last year?**

NIYA FIELDS: Definitely learned a lot. The SEC world is definitely different, but also taught me that we're all ball players. We put our pants on the same way, put our shoes on the same way. Regardless of who we're playing, we're just here to compete.

**Q. In the past couple of years, there's been a lot of talk about players, especially Black players going to HBCUs instead of going to predominantly white institutions, especially with Jackson State and other teams having big wins. For you personally, why did you want to stay or go to an HBCU instead of going to another school that recruited you? What was the impetus?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: First and foremost, I feel like I needed to be home. The experience that I went through in my previous schools, I feel like I just needed support from my family and my friends. I just wanted to go a different route with the HBCU.

And, like you said, just putting the basketball piece in perspective, they were MEAC champions and Coach V, he's got a good system. Everything he told me during the recruiting process, it was real and I felt it.

And everything is happening how it played out, how he said it would play out. He knew my goals -- I still want to go to the WNBA. And I think he's preparing me for my goals and here I am again back on the big stage. Everything kind of worked out how I saw it in the summertime.

NIYA FIELDS: I would definitely say there's a different culture attending an HBCU than a PWI. It's something that you really can't explain; you have to be there and feel. I feel Norfolk State showed me that culture on my visit and gave me welcoming arms and is my second home away from home.

KIERRA WHEELER: Choosing HBCU was easy for me because of the culture built around it. And previously my older sister went to a HBCU. So I got to see the experience before I joined it.

Just being here, last year was my first year here, and we're building a sisterhood and family. And it just kept me confident knowing that I chose the right decision.

**Q. Norfolk State has some history as a 15 seed. Your men's team won a 15-2 match-up in 2012. How much do you know about that game and does it give you any extra motivation or confidence heading into this weekend?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I know a lot about that game. I think it was a big moment for Norfolk State. It's hard to forget about it. One of our alumni, Kyle O'Quinn, he was on the team and he still shows us support to this day.

It just gives us hope and faith that it's been done before and it can be done again.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yes, when I got here, I saw the banners. There's a banner in the gym with a picture on the wall of the score and the seed and how they played the No. 2 team in the country.

It was really nice to see. It's kind of like inspiration every time you go in the gym you see it.

And I think Coach Jones did it again, I think, in, I want to say, 2014 or 2012. I think they beat Alabama. It's nice to see because you don't see that a lot especially on the women's side. But the men's, it gave us some sort of

inspiration.

NIYA FIELDS: I would say every year on Twitter they give us the flashbacks and highlights of that game. So it definitely does provide us some motivation of knowing that it definitely can happen again. And that's something that we're looking to achieve as well.

**Q. We asked them a little bit about going against two imposing posts and Brink's shot-blocking ability, and they were saying just attack as usual and don't let them sort of get in your head space and just keep going. I mean, is that something you've been coaching them to prepare for this game?**

LARRY VICKERS: You know, that's kind of twofold. I have (indiscernible) and Cox back in Virginia. And I don't have the Pac-12 Network. And I have all the channels. It was my first time seeing this iteration of them together, and it's imposing.

But we know Cameron Brink is going to block shots. We know it. Tell her, good job, and tell her, I'll be back in a couple of seconds. But we have to have that mentality. We score a lot of points in in the paint. Obviously they dominate the paint, but they'll have to share some of the space a little bit.

**Q. Along the lines, with your players saying they want to stick with the game plan and their scout, they were very well spoken and very complimentary of you and why they came to Norfolk State. And they don't seem intimidated at all by the atmosphere. And maybe that's good that you don't have the Pac-12 Network and they don't either. Do you kind of see that as an advantage that they may not have as much knowledge about a storied institution with the winningest coach in college basketball history?**

LARRY VICKERS: We're very, very familiar with Stanford and who they are and what they represent for women's basketball and Coach. I tell everybody I even changed it a little bit -- she wrote an excerpt in a book. It's called "Winning Ways for Women's Sports." And I read it.

It talks about where she sits on the bench. How she hires her staff and things like that. So we're very aware of who they are and what they can do.

Luckily, I've been a part of a similar situation to this when I was on the men's side as an assistant, and Norfolk State men's basketball beat Missouri the then-No. 2. You can't go into any of these situations scared. Obviously we know they have posts. We know their wings are the size of our forwards. We know that.

But you've got to be confident in situations like this. And we just want to be confident. We want to be confident that some of the things they might struggle with may be one of our strengths and vice versa.

So we obviously struggle to rebound overall, and that's their strength. We know we have to kind of take advantage of grabbing every defensive rebound that we can.

**Q. This is your second straight year in the NCAA Tournament. What does it mean to you and your program to get back after last year's campaign?**

LARRY VICKERS: Well, I've been on Norfolk State campus 21, 22 years as a player, men's assistant, men's associate head coach, and now eight full years as the women's head coach.

So there was a lot of time in there, especially those late 2000s, there was a lot of one-win, two-win seasons that I saw. So when they gave me this task, I was up for the challenge. I believe in what our program could be. And eight years later, back-to-back, is definitely astonishing.

**Q. What did you learn from playing South Carolina last year that will help you tomorrow?**

LARRY VICKERS: (Chuckles) you know, we just want to compete. We want to compete. And when you play these great basketball teams, I mean Stanford could have easily been a 1. They could have easily been a 1. And if they probably beat USC they are a 1. We understand that.

When you see these great basketball teams you want to take it one media at a time, one quarter at a time, one period at a time. Hopefully in the middle of the fourth you're looking up and you have a chance to win.

That's going to be our mentality going into tomorrow night. We know we've got a tough task. We've been trying to stay up extra late. So we'll see what that looks like, a 10:00 p.m. start. But I will say yesterday we practiced at 10:00 p.m., would have been our time. And it was one of our better practices.

So it made me ask, is that okay for us to practice at 10:00 on the East Coast, because it was definitely one of our better ones.

**Q. Your players said that there's a culture that they feel on your campus and being part of this program. And Diamond coming home and having that support, she mentioned that being really important to her, being around family and friends and the support system of**

**this program. Could you tell us a little bit about maybe the culture around your program and your campus for those of us who don't necessarily know?**

LARRY VICKERS: Well, you know, I don't have the thickest rule book, but the rules and the things that we do do, we want to have a level of perfection with those. And when I got the call about Diamond I was like, you know, who is pulling my coattails?

But she's been around our program for years. She's been at two very good programs at Rutgers, under Coach Stringer and obviously NC State with Coach West. And for her to see our program and say there's something special about that one, you know, when we don't have hundreds of thousands of dollars in NIL and things like that, I guess it just kind of speaks to the way we do things.

And it also speaks to the culture on our campus as far as we play in front of 1500 fans, which might not be a ton here, but across the women's basketball spectrum, that's more than a lot of A-10 schools, that's a lot more than Sun Belt schools. So we have constant support for our women's basketball program all year-round.

The band is a little different. The music is a little different. And she thought it was something that she thought she could be successful in.

For I guess me the difference between South Carolina and this game today is, last year they had, I guess, 10, 12 McDonald's All-Americans. We had zero. This year we have at least one. We have one Jordan (indiscernible) person, we have one Olympian, somebody who can hopefully tomorrow -- I know she's going to see a lot of different coverages -- put us on her back and carry us through some quarters.

**Q. Diamond is a small guard. She's only 5'5". But what is special about her? She has that Philly flyer that Dawn Staley has, of course. So what's special about her and what she brings to this program?**

LARRY VICKERS: She's a professional scorer, that's what she is. She has every shot in the shot tree when they talk about three level scores. Sometimes, man, does she have a fourth level? She just has a knack of finding ways to get her shot off. And that can't really be taught.

And then for us, we do run a lot of pro-style stuff. Stuff that I think will help her on the next level making advanced reads, with lifts and we do some okay stuff, I think so.

So I think that will just kind of show in her game play as we move her to scoring spots or she's at the 1 or wherever she

wants to play, we just try and get her involved in a lot of ways.

**Q. Did you get a chance to speak to Coach VanDerveer yet?**

LARRY VICKERS: I saw her outside but I didn't want to bother her. Everybody was there, the whole staff, almost, was there. I was like, are they kind of meeting, when we pulled up on the bus, but I'm excited to get a chance to meet her tomorrow.

**Q. She over the years -- I've been around her 22 years now. And when Dawn Staley was a young coach, she went into the South Carolina locker room and went to talk to Dawn and her team. She did it when her alma mater, Albany, was here this season.**

What does that mean perhaps for young coaches, what does that mean for you to hear that she continues to mentor and learn -- they traded scouts with Albany. Just things like that that go a long way with mentoring and showing that she's a lifelong learner and still cares about everybody else she's going against?

LARRY VICKERS: I think there are a lot of different coaches across the country. You have culture coaches. You have X and O coaches. You have defensive-minded coaches, you know what that score is going to look like. I think with Coach, when you turn that film on and you see that she's still running new actions, you know, you're like, oh, she's continuing to grow her offense, where some people you turn on, they've been running the same stuff for the last 20 years, and she's continuing to run great stuff for us young coaches to take and run ourselves.

And then obviously she's coached the highs. So anytime you have a moment, Olympians, to take in -- anytime you have a moment to take in any wisdom from that, you want to.

**Q. What is something you're looking for in the first quarter where, if it happens, you'll feel good about your team's chances?**

LARRY VICKERS: I'll tell you this, it's going to be key for us to box out. I guess that will be number one.

They're going to be able to score the basketball. So I'll be looking to see how they play sort of ball screen actions early and see if I have to shift a game plan or two in the game.

But boxing out is the easy one, but the middle ball screen coverage will be something that I'll really be paying

attention to.

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