

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Stanford, California, USA

Maples Pavilion

## Norfolk State Lady Spartans

## Larry Vickers

## Diamond Johnson

## Kierra Wheeler

### Media Conference

Stanford 79, Norfolk State 50

LARRY VICKERS: I'd be lying if I said we weren't a little disappointed with the result of the game. I think you can probably tell, once things kind of got to 25 that we began to be really disappointed and it kind of showed late.

But I will say, this team has done incredible things this year winning 15 in a row, winning back-to-back regular season and postseason championships, first time in ten years in our league. But even with the great basketball accolades, I think this team, every team preaches family but they allowed me to be a basketball coach this year. We didn't have any locker room drama. We didn't have any of that extra foolishness.

So I'm so happy for this group just to have that tremendous year that they had. They worked every day. You know, things didn't go the way we wanted them to but we know it's only going to be one team at the end with a W next to it. So this moment might have come at another time.

**Q. 15 straight to get to this point, no small feat, and I know it's disappointing to lose but you showed a lot of fight on the offensive end and the defensive end for you, Kierra. So just speak to the toughness of this team, but also how you guys felt in this matchup, although you were up against Stanford.**

KIERRA WHEELER: I think my team has, like you said, we had that 15-game winning streak and we were battle tested a lot this year. And it was a lot of different scenarios.



When we came into the game, it was really us versus us. We've been working on defense all year and we take pride in our defense. So I really just encouraged my team to go out there and be dominant because Stanford is a big team, so we couldn't go out there and play little because they are big.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, like she said, coming off a 15-straight winning streak, but we did have some stuff games within that 15 games. But here we wanted to compete. We knew Stanford is going to be a tough game but I think we compete and I think we gave it our all. I think we played physical. I think it was tough. Not the result we wanted but definitely proud of this group for sure.

**Q. Diamond, you were down there with the trees, and that's a metaphor because Stanford is a tree. You're down there with eight rebounds, and Kierra, you had eight rebounds. But what was your mindset coming all the way out to California and playing against Stanford and two all-Americans on this team and then you also have their top 3-point shooter of all time. What was your mindset coming into this matchup?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Well, my mindset was to prepare as much as possible. Practice hard. Work out hard. Watch film. And like I said, come here and compete. That was our mindset. We have to play tough and physical and not worry about where everything goes.

Once we're between those lines, it's between us and the other team. That's kind of the mindset, honestly, just to compete and play super hard and don't give up.

**Q. What was the point where the shift started to happen and you guys hung with them for quite a while time early in the game and they started to push away, what was happening at the time they were starting to put distance?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I think we were defending well. We just had a hard time putting the ball in the basket. So it was really us not scoring the ball that separated us, not really our defense. Our defense remained the same. It was very physical and we were rotating. So the ball not

falling for us was one of our main problems in that second quarter.

**Q. You mentioned the ball not going in the basket. Both you guys got points, but they made it difficult, took a lot of shots. What were they doing that made it so difficult, do you think?**

KIERRA WHEELER: Our pace was sped up, and we had to make different reads that we didn't have to make previously. So I think it was really just us kind of settling in or trying to get settled in to the court and to the environment.

**Q. I can't remember which quarter this was in but you made a really difficult shot, baseline shot, threw it up among three or four defenders and it fell. Just talk about what's kind of the key to making shots like that and just what are you seeing, what are you reacting to, how do you make shots like that?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Believe it or not, I actually practice those type of balance shots. You never know when you need to pull it out.

So I really just practice those shots. At the end of shot clocks, practicing how to get my shot off against taller defenders and stuff like that. So it's just really practice and it's a mindset like, okay, I have to make this shot.

**Q. I had a calf cramp last week, and I think that's what you had. Were both your legs, did you just start cramping up?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, I felt it as I'm running down the court, but still I'm good to play. Because you know, I don't like getting off the court. But once I went for the layup, I came down and both of them just clenched and I just couldn't, you know, I couldn't move my legs and it happened for a pretty long time.

**Q. Did you try pickle juice?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I actually had a salt packet. But I'm definitely getting some pickle juice later.

**Q. What will you remember about this team and this season?**

KIERRA WHEELER: The family that we built and the work that we put in. It was not easy for us all year despite our record. We had to work for it. It was a lot of anticipation of this group coming up from last year because of the success we had.

So I think that whether we knew the standards that were going to be put on us, we put in a little more work and determination, and every single last one of these girls are my sisters and I think we put in a lot of work to build that family as well.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I think that the mindset we all have, we was all in the summer time, like this was one of our goals. We worked like super, super hard and I couldn't ask for more of my family than this team. They definitely welcomed me, and it felt super comfortable. They just built like a sisterhood. I think every goal that we wanted this season, I think we reached. So I'm definitely proud of the team and their mindset and how hard that we really worked.

**Q. Talk about the energy you got from your fans. Your band was awesome tonight, your mascot was awesome doing break dances. Talk about the support you guys have gotten all season from them, and just how cool is it to see your band travel cross country and bringing that kind of energy tonight?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I love that they followed us all the way to Cali to come support us. It was honestly amazing. I seen the mascot. I was trying to focus on the game but he was hitting the splits multiple times. But it's really just been amazing to see the Green and Gold support us like this, and kind of rally behind us all the way in California, it means a lot. Because that Stanford gym gets loud, but I could hear them on the sideline rooting for us, and it meant a lot.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Like she said, the Stanford crowd was super loud, but when we did something good, I heard our fans, too. And when we walked out at halftime to the locker room, they was like, we got it. It was very supportive. It's like a five-hour flight, so for them to travel out here, it means a lot. It means that they really support us and we really appreciate that.

**Q. To have Tara Vanderveer come out and say that what you do well defensively; that you guys really took it to them on defense, and to know that she said that about that you guys, and that you guys can be between the lines with just about anybody and fight for a win, what does that mean to you guys to be able to represent in that way?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: It's just a sign of respect. That was nice to hear that, definitely, coming from the most winningest coach in D1 basketball. So that's love, and we definitely respect her, too, what she did at Stanford, kind of cool. Definitely kind of cool for her to say that.

KIERRA WHEELER: I definitely appreciate her saying that as well. It means a lot to us, and we've got to keep the standard the same because our defensive intensity will always keep us there in the games, and that's what we take pride on.

So I'm glad that we are getting recognition because it's a lot of hard work that goes into our defense.

**Q. When you come out here with the pride of HBCU and you're on the sideline with a legend like Tara, what did you want to prove tonight? I know you want the win but what did you want to prove in your coaching acumen?**

LARRY VICKERS: You know, we kind of knew going into the game, obviously they are the No. 5 team in the country, No. 2 seed. They could have easily been a 1. But you know, a lot of teams don't get to see us play. A lot of people don't get to see us play. That was my first time meeting Coach because she watches a lot of West Coast teams, and I watch a lot of East Coast teams which that was my first time ever meeting her.

So for us, I had a lot of text messages when I checked my phone from people on the West Coast. You know, people generally don't get to see us as much. So you know as we begin to build our brand, we kind of want to be known as more than just HBCU basketball team even though we are that with the No. 1 HBCU band and No. 1 HBCU mascot. We want to be more than just that. We want to be the program to where when the next Diamond Johnson commits, it's not on the ESPN ticker.

So we just want to continue to build our brand and do things the right way and hope that recruits will continue to see what we do, love it, and then come join us.

**Q. With Iriafe and Brink, how much of a challenge was it with two skilled post players? They have a lot of size, but how much is their length also a problem?**

LARRY VICKERS: I'll tell you, and I mentioned it yesterday. I have every channel, Fios, Verizon. And we don't have Pac-12 network. So I had no clue how about and how much better Kiki got, Iriafe. I don't want to mispronounce her name. She is so good. The film doesn't -- she's so good. And you see Brink everywhere, which you should.

But I couldn't believe, as somebody who follows everything and watches as much college basketball as I possibly can, that I had no clue that she was that good. And when you talk about two of them being double trouble; and Coach didn't play her a ton in the second maybe because we play

a lot of zone. Like the second half, she went with more shooters and obviously as super effective. But gosh, she's good. Strong, physical, turning face.

And then everybody knows what Brink does with her intensity. She's No. 2 obviously on draft boards. But I told the ref, I said, she's No. 2 because she can sell fouls. It was like James Harden out there, she's seeing everything and wrapping everything up. That's a skillset. That's a skillset that a lot of players don't have, to have that basketball IQ to do things like that.

But then when you put those two with that shooting, it's just tough, and I thought we did a good job getting to the shooters for the most part. But we were probably there six times and we made all six of those.

**Q. You mentioned that you guys played a lot of zone early on in the game. What was the thought process that went into that, and you know obviously I think towards the end you guys got a lot of deflections, so the defense was really working. What went into that?**

LARRY VICKERS: A lot of programs in the Pac-12, I hate to say this but they play like Stanford. A lot of those programs are kind of copy-and-paste for the most part with the huge things that can all shoot the basketball. We watched every zone clip they had this year. Might have been something like 95.

So we were going to show them something different. I thought they did do an okay job making adjustments in the second half and obviously Coach is Coach for a reason, but I kind of let some of mine get tired. If I could do anything over again, I would go to my normal subpattern instead of letting my stars get to the point to where they were just really, really fatigued.

**Q. Our band didn't win a Grammy but you didn't hear that from me. How much of an inspiration was that -- knowing that you were going to have a pretty tough task coming out to California but Grambling's basketball team, they got an upset win to come into the tournament. A lot of people that are HBCU alums were coaches were excited. It was really inspirational.**

LARRY VICKERS: Who did Grambling beat? You talking about the other night?

That's not on an upset. I'll tell you, as a men's basketball coach, I was part of the coaching staff when Norfolk State beat Missouri. They were at that time the No. 3 team in the country. We expect to win the play-in games.

You know, it's tough, I'll say, for us, it's tough to schedule.

It's tough to do different things. I feel like, you know, maybe we didn't get Diamond till game 10. So if we get Diamond and we have her for Wake and for our Miami tournament and we have her a lot early, and then maybe we can get a 12 and we don't have to see Stanford this year and we don't have to see South Carolina last year. So as we continue to try and schedule and win these nonconference games, I thought officiating, okay, was cool for the most part today when you're supposed to be on a neutral site.

But for us we want to win some more nonconference high major games early to get to a Middle Tennessee 13, to get to a 12. That's the next step for us and hopefully we can get there one day.

**Q. Just talk about the challenge of facing a Stanford team that not only has tremendous size and also with players that can hit the three. How difficult is it to defend a team that gets it going inside and the perimeter with both those aspects?**

LARRY VICKERS: I've never faced a team with this much shooting. It's like everybody is a Steph closeout on our team. We label, Kobe, Klay, Kobe, Alonzo. You try and label closeout space where people can understand what level of shooter they are. Stanford is Klay closeouts, Klay Thompson closeouts all over the place.

I've never seen a roster, I've never played against a roster -- I'm not going to say I've never seen but I've never played against a roster with eight of those. That is unbelievable, and then brink obviously can hit them. I don't think she shot any today but she can hit them as well. It's like, gosh, this team can really shoot the ball.

So a team that is more zone, you know, we knew it was going to be tough get to go all the shooting. I do think we did a good job getting to the halfcourt in the shooting. Sometimes they were open and they didn't even realize we were open because we were getting there so often, but it was the transition threes that really, really hurt us.

**Q. You're usually when you see teams play zone it's more a 3-2 than a 2-3, and they say one of the areas to attack a zone is to get it to the middle of the floor, 3-2 makes it tough to get it to the middle of the floor, especially against Stanford that likes to run the high low. How important is that philosophy of trying to deny middle floor with a 3-2 zone?**

LARRY VICKERS: We generally do a good job matching up. In the first half, I thought we did an excellent job matching up. That's why in the second half, they began to set down screens on our person that was supposed to

match up in the high post and because we were fatigued we didn't do the little things and fight through those like we generally would. But the high post obviously is the most important part. Liked we were fatigued and down screens, we just weren't fighting through. But generally we kind of play that action a little better.

**Q. You forced quite a bit of turnovers and I want to ask you the same question I asked them before they went back to the locker rooms about the fact that Tara recognized the fact that you guys played really tough defense and you guys were really scrappy and got after them especially after the press. You spoke about the brand of basketball you're building. I guess I'm asking for you to elaborate on that knowing that she saw that as well?**

LARRY VICKERS: Gosh, there are such great defensive teams all across the country. Last year we were the No. 1 field goal defense in the country and No. 1 scoring defense in the country. Then we follow-up this year and we finish third or fourth. They know how important that is to me and they buy into everything we talk about and it became important to them, even somebody like Diamond who came from such historic programs. Playing from Vivian Stringer, she's like, guys, we going to spend the first 30 minutes on defense -- yeah, maybe on hour.

It's our identity. It's what we hang our hat on. It's from an X's and O's part, it's the biggest part of our culture and we just want to maybe everybody's life difficult. Now obviously they have some great players, but I thought for the most part, fresh, we did an excellent, excellent job.

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