

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Louisville vs TCU

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Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Schollmaier Arena

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Jeff Walz

Olivia Cochran

Merissah Russell

Media Conference

Q. Liv kind of talked about it on Sunday but now that's it's official, obviously you guys will be going against Hailey; came in together. What's that like for you guys? Have you talked to her a little bit? What is your relationship like now?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Like I said yesterday, Hailey was a great teammate. I wish her the best. But at the end of the day we got to survive and move forward. At the end of the day this is basketball and it's competition, so I'm sure as well that she wants to compete as much as I want to compete against her.

See it's no bad blood. All love. I'm wishing her the best. I know she's wishing me the best. That's all I got to say.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yeah, for sure. The big thing, too -- we're playing against TCU is the biggest thing, too. Really good team. Top ranked team all year, all season.

She's a great player. We know that. We played with her for three years. But like I said, they're a great team and we're prepared to play that team.

Just happy that we won the first round. Obviously you were here last year when we were sitting up here crying. I'm celebrating that and little things. I know Coach Walz mentioned it's Jayda Curry's first tournament win in her career. There are things we want celebrate.

And as O said, we wish her the best. We're going to prepare a great game plan, and we have great coaches. Probably the best in the country.



So we're excited to play another round. We know now. We've been to two Elite 8s and a Final Four and seen a loss in the first round. We know how precious these moments are, and so we are trying to enjoy every day and take it all in this.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Facts.

Q. Leading off that, like you said you guys have had a lot of success. Talk about trying to get back there and also facing the TCU team like you said. They have Hailey and a lot of weapons, Sedona and all that. A team that is trying to get where you guys have been quite a bit. Talk about that intrigue in this matchup?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yeah, for sure. I can only talk about us. Obviously we're looking at their scout. We are focused on our first game and getting over that hump in Nebraska. Obviously we focused our kind of focuses on TCU now.

Like I said our coaches are making a really great game plan. I know we're pretty darn good and I know we have a lot of weapons in ourselves as well. A lot in new young blood. Kind of these girls are going out -- and we talked about them all year, our freshmen, our newbies, our younger players are fresh and have a lot of skill and they are very confident.

And I'm confident in our team. Obviously they're a really -- TCU is really good team. When you go into March you're kind of solidifying what you have in your unit. I feel like we matchup against them really well.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Also, mental focus. You have to have mental focus. Knowing that we are not going to have a lot of days to practice on what they're doing and stuff like that, so just being -- having your mind ready and being together and making sure we have each other's back.

That's only the main focus. That's how you survive in March.

Q. You guys have obviously had a lot of success. You know what the standard is at Louisville. In today's I



guess game there is a lot of transfer movement. You guys played at Louisville your whole careers. Why? What made you decide to stay when I'm sure you've had plenty of options to leave? What was special about Louisville that made you want to start and finish your careers here?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I think my girl sitting right here next to me, she was the first person I met when I came on campus. She's a true friend, a sister to me. I think the bonds we've made over the years -- you can ask either of us, we played on five very different teams because of that landscape the transfer portal.

I can only speak for myself, but I made incredible friends. Coach Walz and the coaching staff as well hold us to a high standard of being good people and teammates and human beings in a community, especially in the community of Louisville.

So that's why I stayed. It's easy to be loyal to this program just because of my teammates alone, our fan base, my schooling. I'm doing my MBA, masters -- for free, thank you Coach Walz.

That's like a huge thing as well. I think a lot of these kids -- I'm 23 now. I can say kids. They're losing site of the loyalty aspect and that long-term or sticking out some of the tough times and good times and rollercoaster of what college athletics are or is.

At that loyalty pays off, because we're here and we get to instill what we learned over the years in these girls and leaving our legacy. That's the reason why I stayed as well. I knew I wanted to leave a legacy on this school. I think we did and are doing a good job finishing off our career here.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Yeah, for me, like she said, I committed to Louisville because the family based atmosphere they had. I'm big on family and loyalty and just being there for each other.

That's what stood out to me. Like you said I couldn't went to any school but I chose here because that stood out to me. They was really truthful and looking into the information about Louisville, they have a winning culture and that's what I wanted to be a part of.

Even though we didn't go where we wanted to last year, we still like always in the talk. Louisville is always in the talk. I love that for us. Everybody can say this about us, but we're always flying in March. You know, that's why I love Louisville and that's why I stay here. Louisville is home.

Q. Merissah, you were talking about your postgraduate work. Do you think, like you said, players are losing focus and loyalty? Do you think in this time and ear that a lot of players are losing focus on the educational part of this?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I can only speak for myself. I'm the child of two immigrants that don't have a post-secondary education, so growing up it was never an option for me not to get a post-secondary education. Obviously COVID was not a great time for the world, but it allowed us to have an opportunity to have another year.

My parents were like, free Masters, so I'm doing any MBA right now. It's amazing. It's difficult to do this and be a Division I athlete, but it's very doable.

But like I said I can only speak for myself. There is a lot of things that don't involve money in my pocket that are also really beneficial being a Division I basketball player. We might see that disappear with this new landscape. I don't know all the details.

I think it'll look very different from the five years me and O you were in college. I am super grateful to have this opportunity. My parents wouldn't have it any other way. I'm just really proud of me and O. She's the first person in her family graduating and I'm the second. It's bigger than basketball in that sense, too.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Yeah, both my parents were Division I athletes and neither of them graduated. For me to be the first is awesome. Like I said when I was getting recruited, we wasn't talking about money and NIL. I came to school to win Championships.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Exactly.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: So I wasn't looking for money and stuff like that. When it came about, oh, that's nice. I wasn't focused on that. I grew up in a good family so like money was never a focus for me. It was getting your education. And my mom going to school for free, even though it's not free, but like you got to work for it, so that's the plan and that's what I stuck with.

I'm thankful for it.

Q. For both of you, it's come up a couple times about our how your last season ended earlier than you wanted it to. What lessons did you learn from that shortened run that you're applying to now?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I was about to say, yeah, it definitely left a bad taste in our mouth just because like Riss said,

that could have been our last game last year. Thank God for COVID. Mainly we...

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I was going to say, have you heard that before?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Ya'll know what I'm saying. We got an extra year. I'm appreciative of that. Even though things didn't go, we stuck on that. We have to get past that. We got to get over that hump. We just kept working for it. We put the freshmen on board. They been stepping up big time, just having each other's back and not trying to focus on what we did last year and what we're doing now; you know what I'm saying? Not being stuck on the past.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yeah for sure. When we lost in that first round game it was obviously a shock. Like I said we have a standard here at our school. I think we were the first team in Coach Walz's history to lose in the first round and we didn't want to make that record. Those things do happen.

Unfortunately it happened to us and we didn't want to be a part of that. But there is a sense when you're sitting there at home and watching five other rounds. It's painful. It's terrible. I sat there and counted we waited eight months to get back to the first round. That's a hard thing to kind of sit with for eight months and reset.

It was motivating for us and we learned toughness. I think we lack a little bit of toughness. If you remember the game we were up 18 at the half because I remember it very vividly. We lost that game. Even now I can feel the pain I felt. You felt like you let not only yourself but the teammates and alumni. To this day I still feel bad.

I'm so happy O said we had an extra year to come back. We wouldn't want to end our career on how this ended. I think we have a lot of returners, me, O, Jayda, Nyla that can instill that confidence and toughness into our freshmen. We tell them you don't want to feel what we felt last year.

That's huge in our practices leading up to the coming year.

Q. You talked about you didn't want your freshmen to feel the way you felt. Kind of got over this hump in terms of that pressure of not want to be repeat it. Just to put kind of a finer point on it, being in this position, you're not hosting, you're on the road; do you feel like you're dangerous without some of that pressure?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I mean, great question.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Yeah.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I think the last three years we haven't hosted. Our junior year we played Texas at Texas and upset them. That was pretty awesome as well.

We always feel dangerous. Any time we're always the underdog. People don't like us and don't like Coach Walz. They don't like us. We've always lived with that for the past five years.

It's just a regular, what is it, Saturday? You know what I mean? We have a great game plan in place and going to listen to the coaching staff and go out there with toughness and believe in ourself even in nobody else do. These a chip on our shoulder. Coach Walz raised us in this program to believe that. So we always feel dangerous.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Always. She answered it great.

Q. We talked a little bit about it last night. When you look at everything that they've brought in all the different pieces, talk about what you have seen on film and turned your attention to at that team?

JEFF WALZ: Yeah, very good basketball team. Got good, really good pieces all over the floor. They shoot the ball well. Obviously great post play.

Guards that can attack. Yeah, it's really, really good basketball team.

Q. Obviously we've talked about it a little bit. You know Hailey, Sedona; you coached both of them. Talk about what works so well with them on same team?

JEFF WALZ: I mean, like what do you mean? They're both great players. What the hell? I mean, it's not like they've reinvent the game here. It's like two shitty players we just made great. They're really good players. They're really good players.

They've got other really good players around them. You know, one thing about this game, I mean, our Final Four runs, national championship games, like it's not one player. You know, Hailey's freshman year with us we had Dana Evans on the team that was a two-time All-American. Liz Dickson in the post who is still playing professionally.

I mean, Kianna Smith. I can just give you the whole list of them. So it's not just two kids. It's the whole team. If it's just two then it's easy to win. You know, but they have got a great complement of players.

Q. So I'm just curious, you've been on -- haven't hosted for the last couple years. One of those you did



upset a hosting team. So are you relishing the opportunity to play spoiler here?

JEFF WALZ: It's just next game. It's really the next game. I mean, even when we played at home, we've had games where we got to beat in the second round game hosting once.

So you're not really too concerned about where you're playing. It's the opportunity to play. And that's what makes this time of year so much fun. We're not going into it going, we're trying to upset somebody. There are 32 teams left. You know, after the games that are being played today.

Everybody is good. It's what I talk to our team about today at film. You're not at a point of the season where it's like okay this team is bad. You know, there is 32 left. Everybody can play. You got to play for 40 minutes. You can't afford to have three or four minute lapse in the middle of the game where you forget what you're doing at the defensive end or you don't execute at the offensive end.

You can't let one turnover turn into a bad execution on offense, not communicating on defense, and before you know it, it's an 8-0 run. We were fortunate in last night's game because that's what took place starting the fourth. We had talked to our kids after the third going hey, here is what they like to run, a flare screen. They ran the exact same play and hit a three.

Then we come down the floor, we have bad offensive execution, we don't score. Before you know it they go on a 10-0 run. Then in three and a half minutes they score 10. I think the other three quarters last night, maybe 16, 14, 14. I was like, guys, this is our problem. We would defended well and then the next six and a half we give up four points.

So those are the things you just can't afford to have. We were fortunate to come out with a win in last night's game. So our kids know that. It should be a great basketball game tomorrow.

Q. Take on a program that's advancing to the second round for first time in 19 years. Done it a lot. What are some of the things that you have learned over the 18 years with these 36, 48 hour turnarounds that make sure you're ready in such a short period of time?

JEFF WALZ: This time of the year it's -- you've already done enough preparation. It's not like you're going to be -- you've already played against teams that are ice ball screens, hedge ball screens, double press, whatever.

You've already done that. It's just trying to make sure you go over some personnel in case there are some kids that

you may have not seen before. But we've played against teams where they've got a shooter. So it's not like this is the first tomorrow we've played where a kid can shoot the ball. Not the first team we played a team that has a kid that can come off a ball screen and score.

So it's different at the beginning of the year. Now it's just a matter of trying to make sure you take care of yourself. We have to make sure we execute on both ends of the floor. Make sure, you know, we keep the game at the pace we want it to be played at.

And that's when we talk to our kids about. It's nothing new. We are not reinventing the game for the game tomorrow.

Q. Merissah and Olivia were in here talking about postgraduate work and all the stuff they'll do in the classroom. In this day when so many kids are moving around and I know it's got to be hard with keeping up with your education when year moving around, degree path. What does it say about two girls like that and the girls that stay in one place and continue and take advantage of the educational opportunities?

JEFF WALZ: Excited for both of them. They'll always have a place to call home, you go five years. Academically, all this transferring stuff, I actually think it's got a positive side to it academically.

If you're not eligible, you can't transfer. You know, the old saying when I was in school Ds get degrees.

Q. It was Cs.

JEFF WALZ: Hell no. Ds. You kidding me? You can't transfer if you got a load of Ds. They around the going to transfer to another school.

So I think in some ways because a kid might, oh, I might want to transfer, they're more focused to make sure they're taking care of business in the classroom. 15 years ago if someone transferred it was like, oh, shit, what's wrong with that kid. Okay, there is an issue.

Now it's almost like you sit here and look at Olivia and Riss and you're like, what's wrong with those kids? They stayed. I will say the hard thing about all of this for so many of them, is I do worry about what's going to happen when they're finished with basketball and they've got to get a real job.

You know, all the sudden they have a bad week at that job and they just say, I'm transferring. That ain't how this shit works. You better find a job first.

It's not something -- we're teaching them in some ways -- and I talk to my kids about it all the time -- I don't want anybody to stay that doesn't want to be here.

But if they think you're going to come in and everything is perfect the entire time you're delirious. You really live in a fantasy world.

And the kids that are able to go, okay, I've had a tough week. You know, but how can I change it? Because I promise you it's what I tell them all the time. I'll ask them before they come, when they decide I'm come to go Louisville to play, I ask them: What do you want? What are your individual goals? Don't give me team goals. I want to win a championship.

That's what every kid says and I think it's great. What are your individual goals. Some will say I want to be a pro. Perfect. Well, we know what it looks like. We've had 17 kids here drafted at Louisville. That's not counting the other places I worked. Professionals. I'm just here at Louisville. That's in the counting the ones that have gone on to play in Europe.

We know what it looks like. Are you sure that's what you want? Because it's not easy. That day that you are studying for an exam the night before and it's a big exam and you come to practice that day and you're not really focused, that's not acceptable.

So I'm going to get on you and then I've got players that I want to have a great college career. Then afterwards I want to maybe get married, have a family and be a professional but not on the basketball side.

Well, those are the kids after practice you might ask them to stay for 10, 15 minutes, work on some free throw shooting, on your three point shooting. But the ones who want to be a pro, they're the ones that are staying for 45 minutes.

Because we're just not trying to get you better for the four years we're here; we're trying to help prepare you for life after. Sometimes it gets hard. The fun thing for me that I enjoy are the ones that call me back that have been playing that are like, hey, you helped prepare us for this, because, man, it's a business.

You get to the professional side of things, you know, you go to have Europe as a guard, they're expecting to you score the basketball.

When you go over there and you're scoring 6 to 8 points. It's not they call you into the office and call home, hey, we really got to have her doing better. They just get a plane

ticket and send you home.

Kids are like, oh, shit. That's reality. We try to prepare you for it. We had a situation with one of our past players that she was picked up on a team in Europe, put into an apartment with another teammate. She played really well the next night out. The following day her roommate was packing and she is like, where are you going? And the kid that played for me goes, she came up to me and goes, well, you took my spot. They cut me.

It's the real world. So those are the things that we try to help some of them understand. Life is tough. There will be some tough times. Every once in a while, put your head down and figure out how it fix it and go from there. I've got to problem with the portal. It's been good to us, real good.

So everybody gets upset when one or two decide to go. It's okay. We have benefited from it as well.

Q. Going of the portal. You have eight freshmen. Some have really shined on a national level. When it comes to player attention, is there conference about that? How do you keep everybody together in this era where it's so easy to --

JEFF WALZ: There is no concerns at all. Some will stay; some will go. I mean, we do what we can as coaches and as staff. We give the best environment for them to be successful, academically, socially, personally, and basketball.

A lot of them, I would say, they think coming into college is easy. You know, I was the best player in my high school team. Well, everybody out here was the best player on they're high school team. There is not one player who was the worst player on their high school team playing in this game tomorrow.

They're all elite. And then you try to explain to them, you're coming in a lot of times as a freshmen at 17 and 18 and playing against 24 and 25, shit, a 30 year old anymore. Are you kidding me? With two kids.

Like you just don't know what -- it's different. So all the sudden you're looking at a 17 year old going up against a 22 and 23 year old. Over those four or five years the changes that take place in the female are amazing. How much stronger they get, matured, developed.

You can tell. You can sit out here and watch these games. Yeah, she's a junior, senior, freshmen. When they don't get what they want, they think, well, I'll find something better.

That's just part of it. So do I hope everyone stays? Of course. They're great kids. Do I expect it? I don't know. I think as a coach you're extremely naive if you don't think somebody is going to leave.

So then you find out here and, what, the 25th, is that when the portal opens? Yeah. Then you sit there, you find out who is going to stay, who is going to go, and then you find out who has left someplace else, and I'm not sure why we put names on the back of jerseys anymore.

It's not like they stay for long enough sometimes. So I'm not worried about that. We're going to focus on tomorrow's game, and then if we're fortunate enough to win we have got next week to prepare. If not, we'll figure out what's going to happen.

Q. On your last couple answers I heard you speak about some things that you value. Resilience and problem solving. How do you see those values reflected in this team you're putting on the floor tomorrow?

JEFF WALZ: You look at the year, how we started at 6-5. We had some games -- the game against Oklahoma at home where we were up 18 in the first half and lose in the last minute of the game; overtime game at Kentucky where we lost.

But instead of just putting our head between our legs and going, shit, we're done, we just figured out, okay, what do we have to do to get better? And just kept getting better day after day after day.

It's the long game. We weren't just playing the short game. I think that's why you see us still playing here today because our freshmen have gotten a lot of experience. Upperclassmen, we've learned who excels at what on the basketball court. When you're out there with as many new ones as we had, you're really trying to get a feel for okay where does she like the ball, where does she like a ball screen set. When are they going to shoot so then I know when to go and rebound it.

And that's the resiliency as we've continued to grow. We've had some games where -- some really great games where we pulled out at the end. Then we've had some tough ones as well.

But we wouldn't be here if we hadn't had the growth that we've shown from day one to now.

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