

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Auburn vs Arizona

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Arizona Tigers

Coach Adia Barnes

Esmery Martinez

Helena Pueyo

Media Conference

Q. The team has been through so much adversity in terms of injuries and people leaving the team this year. Can you talk about how that has prepared you guys for this, strengthened the team, brought you together if that's the case?

HELENA PUEYO: Yeah, I mean, we have had a lot of challenges, but at the end of the day we've just got to come together. It is what it is. We have who we have, and I think that's where we have been doing this the whole year, and we're going to show people how tough is our conference. We're just ready. We're seven players, but we're just going to go for it.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, I feel because we have a young team, a lot of transfers, we really had a tough time with everything this season, but at the end of the day we become together, we become resilient and support each other. If somebody is hurt we try and give them rehab because we're only seven players, and we will try to come together to play hard and be there for each other.

Q. Can you guys talk a little bit about how playing in your conference helps prepare you for the tournament? You guys could have potentially had three No. 1 seeds this year and you won some big games, including at Stanford on the road. How does that help when you're going into a tournament like this?

HELENA PUEYO: I feel we're more than ready because playing in the Pac-12 is the toughest conference in the country, and I think we're going to feel a lot of difference because it's not the same.



But at the end of the day you don't know who you're going to play against, so you've just got to go hard. But I think the Pac-12 is going to make a lot of difference. That's what we're going to do.

Q. Could you guys address the transfer portal issue from a player's perspective? Do you feel that the transfer portal has been a good thing for women's college basketball? And do you feel it gives you guys a little bit bigger voice when coaches know that anybody can transfer out if they don't like what's going on in the program?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: I have no opinion about it. I don't know.

HELENA PUEYO: I mean, I don't know. I think it just depends on the player. If you're not comfortable somewhere, you can just go somewhere. In my case, I've been comfortable my whole five years so I didn't have to transfer, but it depends on every player. So I don't really know.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about the culture of this program with Coach Barnes and what she has built here? You're back to having a young team this year, but four years in a row in the tournament. What has she meant to this tournament?

HELENA PUEYO: For me, she means everything to me. I came here five years ago. I didn't know where I was going to go, and then my second year we went to the Final Four, so I was like, this is my right place to be. Then I kept staying here for these four years, and I think Adia did some really good things with us, with some other players -- not just because of her but some other good players, other good transfers, also, so I think we have a good opportunity to go back again to the Final Four.

Q. Talk about the challenges that Auburn will present to you tomorrow night.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: I think they're a really good team. They're a really physical team. They really play good



defense like us. It's going to be a good challenge tomorrow for us and for them, too. We're going to come out, play hard and play like we did the whole year.

HELENA PUEYO: Yeah, I think they're a really aggressive team. I think we've just got to be smart. They're going to be on the night the whole time so we've just got to be smart and run the right plays. But I think it's going to be fun. This is the time of the year when it's fun. We're just going to show our best and we're just going to give our 100 percent.

Q. Talk about coming here to Connecticut into this storied arena and playing here.

HELENA PUEYO: I think it's really cool. It's my first time here at UConn, so I always wanted to see how it looks like, and I think it's pretty cool for us, and I think it's going to be good for us, also, to play here.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: It's different weather, too.

ADIA BARNES: I'm really excited to be here. For most of our players, their first time all the way out in Connecticut. But there's so much history here. This is a beautiful place. Just such a legendary place with a lot of history. Happy to be here, and excited for the tournament.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about the adversity that your team has faced this year with injuries and players leaving the team and how you've overcome that and what you do when you have seven players available?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I was joking about this before. I said, a couple years ago I had 15 players, and I remember at the end of the season, I said, I will never have 15 players again, it's so many, because 10 people are really upset and five people don't really have a chance to play.

Towards the end of this year, I said, I will never have just 10 players or 11 because of injuries.

I've never been in this situation before. If you look at the very beginning of the season, Montaya Dew tore her ACL. That was the first time anybody had under torn their ACL since I was a head coach, so that was a big blow, but then I think a lot of things just happened in a short amount of time, and then losing Sali after that was really big because they're similar positions, they're both like three fours for us, and obviously Maya choosing to focus on medical school, that was hard. So just stuff that you couldn't plan for and that wasn't expected.

But I think the great thing about it is it's really given our young players a chance to come together and just figure it out. We've had seven players for most of the year.

I know it's going to show numbers-wise we have eight, but the eighth is a recent walk-on that doesn't know our system yet, can't really play because she doesn't know our numbering system or our philosophy. She's only been in a couple practices. But we just needed a body.

These seven have been just great. It's been so rewarding to watch them grow. Three freshmen starting that are getting so much experience.

I think that one of the great things is no one is complaining about playing time because they're all going to play.

But I think also from a player's perspective, they know they're going to get opportunities. They go and they play so hard.

The style that we play I think is even more challenging with a shorter bench because we're up, we're aggressive, so sometimes it amazes me. Helena averages like 39:30 a game, No. 1 in the Pac-12, one of the top in the country, and she always plays their best player. She always defends the best player.

We ask for a lot from her on offense, so it's amazing.

But they have heart. We have a great group of -- a cohesive unit with confidence, believes in each other, and I think we've just figured it out.

I think when we had adversity -- every time something happened, we got together more and came together more. It's been fun to be on this journey with these seven or eight.

Q. I wanted to get your perspective on the transfer portal. We saw in Congress coaches saying that things have gotten so wacky that they're retiring. They don't want to deal with it anymore.

ADIA BARNES: I think that's going to happen more this year, too.

Q. I wanted to get your perspective from a coach's point of view, first on whether you think the players have a different kind of voice now that there is the transfer portal and what the solution is to all of this.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, the first thing is I'm too young to retire, so I think -- I think you will see a lot of shift in retirement. I think that people -- it's different. It's even shifted and changed in my eight years.

I remember Doug Bruno said a couple years ago, this is



like the wild, wild west, and it kind of is. It's different now.

I think players can just leave when they want. It's hard. You've got to recruit your team and recruit the portal. It's just different.

Q. In terms of building a team, for you, how has that been? The transfer portal obviously takes away some players, but you do kind of get to rebuild in your image every year because you get these players --

ADIA BARNES: I think the good thing is that you can get good fast, so you can go to the portal fast. You can rebuild. I think those are the positive things.

But I think the hard thing is you have to recruit your own team, and you have to maintain your players and go in the portal.

I think that's the challenge.

But it's just changed. I think more of recruiting now, it's so transactional. It's not relational. I think that's hard. It's hard keeping your players, keeping them happy, and then just trying to build and figure out what direction you want to go in, so do you want to go in the portal every year or do you want to build off freshmen.

I think the reality is nowadays it's hard to win with freshmen because they're freshmen. You have to find the balance of developing your freshmen, keeping this foundation, and then bringing in pieces from the portal.

But I think if you look at the positive side, you can get good really fast. You can go in the portal and you can get three or four players, and you can turn a program around really, really quickly.

I think those are the positives.

I think it's just harder to lose players continuously. If you look at some of the players -- like you may recruit them since eighth grade, and then you're talking about in the portal, so the portal hit, like what, like a week ago. There's like 500 players -- how long ago? Well, the actual grad transfer portal, that hit a few weeks ago. The other portal, the other part of the portal hit like two days ago. There's probably 500 players in two days.

I think the difficult thing about that is you recruit players for a couple days, unless you've known them from before. So if you knew them from before, you may recruit them and they went to another school, so you re-recruit them. But it is very fast, and I think it's hard because you don't have time to develop the relationship, and you're building

programs off of that.

But when I think about like the history at Arizona, we have had a lot of success with transfers. There was not the portal when I first got to Arizona, but Aari McDonald was a transfer, Dominique McBryde, Tee Tee Starks. We have had success, and that's how we got good fast. That's how we ended up winning the NIT and then going to the Final Four was off of that.

So I think if you get the right people for your culture and your program, you can be very successful, and if you don't, it's hard.

But I am not a coach -- I don't want eight new players a year. That's just not what I want. I think it's really hard because we teach a lot -- I think we have a pretty complex defensive system, which you see the benefits after a couple years.

For me as a coach, it's hard. Some players you've recruited since eighth grade. You develop them, they work, and they say leave because they don't play what they anticipated, and then like you see, you're like, I taught her to do that, she can do that, so other people kind of reap the rewards of your work. So that's hard.

I think for mid-majors, I think it's killing mid-major programs because you can develop a kid, maybe she was a diamond in the rough, you got her, you developed her, and then another big Power Five school comes in and says, I'm going to give you 50,000 but the mid-major school had no money to pay for NIL.

I think those are difficult situations for coaches, and I think it really impacts the lower level schools.

Q. We've talked a lot about the grueling Pac-12 schedule and everything that you guys went through with that. I want to bring up a couple things from November and December. The Atlantis tournament, that was a grind going into that because of how tight that schedule was there, and then the week where you guys played Texas, Gonzaga and ASU, how did those stretches, even earlier on when you had more bodies, prepare you for these moments when you're going to have to potentially play three in a weekend against great teams?

ADIA BARNES: Thinking about that, you're making me remember that, and like who did that schedule, but that was me.

No, I think that I wanted to challenge us. I wanted us to play good teams.

But when you do the schedule, it's way earlier, so when you do the schedule months before, you don't anticipate all the roster changes.

Looking back, I scheduled pretty difficult for this team, not anticipating transfers and stuff like that. We were very young. So a very young team to play that schedule.

Learn your lesson in year eight, it's probably not to schedule so hard in the future because it's the gauntlet in the Pac-12. It was so tough. But the positive thing was we had some adversity, we played some really hard teams, and it really prepared us for the Pac-12.

I think when I look at that, that's the positive thing, but obviously I didn't anticipate all the injuries and stuff like that, but those are things I can't control.

But that little stretch right before the Atlantis tournament, that was a very difficult stretch. It's just kind of the way the schedule went.

But we learned from all this. I think we've gotten better. Our players have gained so much experience. Starting three freshmen, of course, you're going to lose some games just because of experience and depth, but I think that's some of the reason why we've just continued to get better and better.

Yeah, so I definitely scheduled very difficult. I mean, Gonzaga -- we played some teams that most people are like, they get calls from them and they're like, we're not playing that team. Mid-major teams that are very, very tough. But I think it's going to pay off in the end, so hopefully we'll see in the tournament.

Q. You touched on it a little bit in your opening statement, but just being able to see your players embrace the history of UConn and being on this stage that is really one of the meccas of women's college basketball, being able to just step up to this stage and see these bright lights to build for the rest of their basketball careers?

ADIA BARNES: You know, just pulling up here, I think some people didn't really know -- like Brea has never been here. She didn't really know what to expect. I think it's so different, like just the landscape and everything just looks so different, so I think some of them are like, wow, it's cool. But we're definitely freezing because we're used to Arizona weather, so for us it's really cold.

I think as far as history, there is so much history here. We haven't been to the course. We've only been in the locker

room.

But I think they're excited. I don't know because we haven't really talked about it yet, but I think just the first thing, regardless of where it is or who we play, I think just overall the excitement of being in the tournament, very blessed to be here. If you would have asked our team like six weeks ago do you think we're going to make it to the tournament, most would have probably said no.

I think all of that, like it didn't matter where we go or who we play. I think they're just happy to be here, and we want to win. I think that's the great thing about this young team is they just want to win. They don't care who, and probably because they're young, so they don't know the stakes or the weight of some games.

But I'm sure they're excited to be here. I'm sure they're probably looking around like, oh, this is what I thought or wasn't what I thought. But there is a lot of history here, and I think Geno has done a tremendous job of building a dynasty, and it's really hard to do. It's really hard to do here. It's kind of in the middle of nowhere. It's a beautiful place. But it's hard to build something like he did.

I'm excited to see how our reactions are and how we approach everything, and I'm excited to see how we're going to play and what we're going to do moving forward.

Q. I know that you obviously have been scouting for the last couple days as soon as you found out exactly who you were playing. You probably started before last week. What can you tell us about how tough an opponent Auburn really is?

ADIA BARNES: They're really good. It's funny, watching film, the SEC is really physical. A lot more physical than I think the Pac-12 allows us to play. I think the Pac-12 is a lot more tactical, strategic. The SEC is athletes, physical, tough, big. I look at everybody's just bodies, and I'm just like, wow.

Auburn is really athletic, very similar to Texas's style as far as aggressiveness and in the passing lane. Very, very aggressive on the boards, so that's going to be hard.

I think that the challenge is going to be can we take care of the ball, can we handle their pressure without rushing, and the thing is we do the same things. So we're both about 20 turnovers per game. So I think it's going to be about who takes the ball, who handles the pressure, who takes care of the ball, and then I think one of the challenges for us because they're big and athletic is keeping them off the boards when they miss shots.

But I think we do a lot of things well, and looking at a lot of games, they haven't faced some of the things we do defensively. So I think when I look at the SEC, I look at it's a super talented league top to bottom, very athletic, big, strong, but very -- not aggressive on on-balls, which I would think if you're really aggressive, you would be aggressive on the on-balls, but most of them contain on on-balls. Some may hedge but most contain. But they're really aggressively defensively in every other area.

But I think for us, a lot of people have a hard time and have to prepare us trapping and hedging and doing different things. I think our challenge is slowing them down, keeping them out of the paint, and then I think they have to also handle our pressure.

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