

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Arizona Tigers

Coach Adia Barnes

Esmery Martinez

Jada Williams

Media Conference

Arizona 69, Auburn 59

ADIA BARNES: I'm extremely excited. Auburn is a really tough, physical team, and we just came out and battled. Didn't play a lot of people, but came out and just played a really good first half. Just proud of our tournament run, proud of our freshmen and Esmery and our seniors. Just proud of all seven, or all eight now.

Q. This is for Esmery. What can you say about Jada? She came out so aggressive and ready to go. I know in yesterday's practice she was the one who was getting everybody going. What have you seen from her? What did you see from her tonight that really helped you guys win this game?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, I feel Jada is the type of person that bring energy on the court and outside the court, when she slows down she's trying to like go all out and give us all some energy.

Even when we like when we (indiscernible) she trying to like tell us, pushing us to go hard and don't think about the game because it's just a game. Keep working hard.

Q. Jada, first NCAA tournament game. You didn't look nervous out there. 17 points. How did it feel going out there for your first March Madness experience?

JADA WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think my team was really, really ready and prepared for it. In the locker room we were all just mentally focused and ready. We knew this game was going to be very physical, so we tried play through all the fouls and all that stuff.



Just play aggressive, play our game grave, play loose, play smart, things like that. Yeah, everyone played a really good game. I think we controlled the pace of the game for most of the game. When they went on runs, we stopped them.

I think we played overall a really good game.

Q. Jada, when they made it a tight game towards the end, seemed like Helena was the one, and Es. Es got a defensive rebound that was really key, and Helena had her hand in everything, whether it was an assist, score, deflection. Didn't matter what it was. What was it in that moment that you think helped your seniors really push it and help you guys at that point?

JADA WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think we been in situations like this all year. In the Pac-12 we play competitive games every weekend, so I think we're prepared for this. Things started getting chippy, so when I see Helena point at somebody, you get Helena mad, I think it's over for you. Helena doesn't get mad, but you could tell Helena has the ability to take over a game, so she do it, we just say good job.

That's on her own timing. We're all a product of her. We know she has the ability to do that. She's a fighter. Came in with four fouls, still played aggressive, still played good defense, got us like momentum-shifting rebounds. Those are our leaders and we look up to them and we know they're going to come in and do everything they can to help us win.

Q. For both Es and Jada. All season long, especially over the last month or so, you guys sort of have a different type of mentality, right? It's sort of us against the world. You really came together. What is your -- what was your goal coming in here? I mean, you just trying to prove to everybody that you belong and that they should be paying attention to Arizona women's basketball?

JADA WILLIAMS: I think, yeah. We're not just happy to be here. I think we talked about that before the game with our



strength coach Chris. We're not just happy to be here. A lot of teams might be, but we're here to make a statement and make a run, and we are going to keep fighting until the end.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Yeah, she right.

Q. I guess just foul trouble early on, talk about how that changes maybe your game plan, what you guys do. Only have seven, eight players.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, it changes a lot, because if you saw how we defended in the first quarter, second quarter really well. Our on-ball defense, and pick and roll defense really disrupted them and didn't allow them to go downhill. They are very good at going downhill and they are really athletic and tough to guard one-on-one.

You saw a shift in the third quarter. Because we had foul trouble we had to go more passive on the on-balls and gave up 20 points in the third quarter and only gave up 19 in the first two quarters.

So that does limit us. I think just us learning how the game is being called and being smarter is very important. So like talking to Brea, she's a freshman, when you have to, you can't go for that block. You can't go for that hand. If you're late on something, it's better just to contain versus getting third foul, because then we have to sit her.

That takes away your rhythm. It's funny, because we are -- you know, we have to improve on boxing out. Well, today we were intentional about it. We knew one of the keys to the game, to winning the game was to box out.

We got to like five fouls on boxing out. I think that's the first time ever. Couple of them I was like -- you know, they were tough calls, but they were trying to do it so I'll take those.

I think just playing smarter because of our depth and learning from that, and as we advance, we have to do that. For a while I was like -- because we can get into a situation we don't have enough players to finish, so we just have to be smarter.

Q. So Adia, what does this mean to you to win this game in the fashion that you did?

ADIA BARNES: Well, it means a lot because there is no doubt we should be here. We deserve to be here. We should have been seeded a little bit better, but that's just what I think.

I think that we play against good teams every single

weekend, so we're definitely prepared, so I think that that's why you'll see Pac-12 teams have success in the tournament.

And I think that we feel that we can play with anybody, at any time. We get prepared for that because it's tough every weekend in the Pac-12.

So we don't care if it's SEC school, ACC, Big10, Big XII, we're ready. That's the good thing about starting three freshmen, is they don't know what to expect so don't know what to be nervous for.

They just go out and play. For us to do this with three freshmen, two seniors, I think it's meaningful. It's really hard to do because they were just freshman and learning and never played on this type of stage.

That's why this one is meaningful. Auburn is an experienced team and they're physical, good. They're tough.

So at halftime Jada said, they're strong. I know. It's just a different game. This is post season. It's win-or-go home. We stepped up to the plate. We punched first and played a pretty good game.

And I don't think we've played our best. We can play better. Turned it over more than we ever do. Helena never has five turnovers. We don't usually turn the ball over 18 times.

We still haven't played our best basketball. I think hopefully as we progress we'll play better.

Q. When you look at this win, it was really a balanced attack.

ADIA BARNES: It was.

Q. Talking about what Jada did with the spark she brought and what the seniors brought everybody, all seven had a huge part in what you did. Courtney was a real good defensive stopper. Isis played some good minutes. What does it mean at this point of the season to have everybody come together and really contribute and have good games?

ADIA BARNES: I mean, that's what you want to do. When you prepare your team all year you prepare it to play well in March. I think that's what you work for and you work for seeding and positioning to do this.

We talked in the pregame, I don't think any of us knew we would be in the NCAA tournament six weeks ago. A lot



was changing, lost half of our scoring this year, and we found way to rally. We have the right eight. They're relentless. Tough. They don't care who we play at any time.

Those are freshmen with that mentality, and that is usually something you're learning throughout your career. So I think for us, it's just coming out, playing like the defense we know we can play.

We do make mistakes, but just being relentless one possession at a time. We traveled across the country two times to play this team, so I'm proud of us. I think the future is bright. We have the foundation of good young players. I'm excited to see us in a couple years after getting this experience.

But I don't think these freshmen play the way they do without all the experience in the Pac-12. They had a lot of playing time. They played a tremendous amount of minutes. This has prepared them for this moment.

Did that answer your question? Kind of. What parts did I miss, because it was a long question?

Q. A balanced attack. Hasn't always been that way.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, so I think I'm proud of -- Esmery got in foul trouble, she sat, and came out and still did some great things.

Breya started off hot. She started off hot and had to sit because of foul trouble. I think she would've had a big game.

Jada did not shoot the ball well. One for six I want say in the first half, but she drew ten fouls and got to the free throw line. She didn't play her best game and shoot as well as she normally does.

Helena played well.

Skylar played well. I don't think they played the best they normally play. To have the balance, everybody stepped up and did different things.

One person I want to point out that was really key to winning this game is Isis. She played 26 minutes when Esmery and Breya were in foul trouble, and she was phenomenal of off help with Grayson. She was running off a lot of stagers and pin-down actions, and she did a good job helping and helped Helena contain her.

That doesn't show up on the stat sheet but that was very valuable. And Courtney came in and played defense.

Even if it wasn't scoring, it was doing different things at different times to help us win a game. I think it's a balance, and we only have seven, so everybody will always get playing time.

So they played free and I think everybody played well. Four people in double digits is really good.

Q. Just to touch on what you said about balance, Skylar and Jada, they're freshmen. Combined for 30 points and 13 of the 18 at the free throw line. Talk about how they played in their first NCAA tournament game.

ADIA BARNES: They played awesome. You know, they've gotten better every single game. I remember Skylar's first start. It was I think against Stanford at home. She was like so nervous, but just the way they've grown, her and Jada and Breya, has been just amazing to watch and be a part of.

And to show up like this, 13 for 18 from the free throw line and combine for 30 pints as freshmen on the biggest stage is pretty impressive.

I'm just excited to see how they're going to be throughout your career if they're doing this as freshmen. Proud of them. This was a team that -- they pressure you really -- they're really tough pressure.

I think they handled it well. Sky did a great job attacking the rim, and Jada did a great job of finding a way to score when it wasn't with shooting. It wasn't just spot-up threes or pull-up jumpers. Those weren't falling. What did she do? She knows they're aggressive, she's really smart, and she started attacking the rim. That's a good way to get confidence and back in the game and then she drew ten fouls.

She drew almost half of the fouls. So just freshmen usually don't do that and they don't understand that or hang their heads when their shots are off. These freshmen don't. That's one of the reasons why we've had success and why we're in the tournament.

These three freshmen have started for a long time and they are continuing to just battle, show toughness, and leadership. And Jada is one person that's really done that. Esmery said it. She is a connector. She brings people together and brings a sense of toughness.

But also one thing to remember is Jada and Breya have played at a high level. They played with USA Basketball, so experience against good competition. But not the

tournament.

Q. About the foul trouble, Breya's first couple were out there on the perimeter rather than inside. What does she still need to do out there?

ADIA BARNES: She still needs to not use her hands so much. Her body positioning and her foot -- her feet are in the right place, but what she tends to do is on the drive she tends to touch. So those are fouls that are called. And she has to learn not to that. Or she tends to reach after kind of a play is dead and gets fouls like that. I think that through the year she's struggled with those type of fouls, but then she's corrected it. Then tonight just had a couple of those.

But the challenge for her in her defense is those guards are really fast. They're coming downhill really fast and she's having to jump out and be aggressive.

So I think once she learns how -- if she gets one, don't take the risk on the second one or don't go over someone's back on the second one.

Or when you have two, then don't go for the blocked shot. Better to go straight up and give a layup versus get your third and have to sit.

Those are things she'll learn. We show her film and continue to teach. She'll get better at that.

She definitely has to improve because I think her today she played 16 minutes. But I think if she plays 25 I think she easily has a double-double. Started off the game two for two.

She will continue to get better and learn and we'll continue to teach her.

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