

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Arizona vs Syracuse

Friday, March 22, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Syracuse Orange

Felisha Legette-Jack

Dyaisha Fair

Georgia Woolley

Media Conference



give up.

I think that they're a good team, of course. There's no disrespect there. But we're also a good team, as well, and we're going to prepare properly and be ready for tomorrow.

Q. Dyaisha, this isn't your first go-around in the NCAA Tournament. You played here with Buffalo. But what's this moment been like for you with Syracuse?

DYAISHA FAIR: I've just been able to be where my feet are, not take it for granted. It's been a long run for me, and here I am in my last one. I haven't really tried to get on the emotional side of it, but I'm just locked into what this team and what this staff wants out of me, and I'm just locked in.

Q. Georgia, obviously this is Dyaisha's final run with the team. What can you do as secondary scorers to support her, and what areas of Arizona's defense are you looking to exploit?

GEORGIA WOOLLEY: I think just as secondary scorers, just being ready, just playing who we are. It's not necessarily secondary this, that, the other, but doing what we've done all season. Dyaisha knows where we're going to be, we know where Dyaisha is going to be, just playing together and knowing our roles, and I think that's what's going to break down, like she said, the Arizona defense. Just knowing our roles and executing them.

Q. Dyaisha, as the best player on the team, one of the best players in women's college basketball right now, as somebody alluded to earlier, the early bounce from the ACC Tournament, from your perspective what does this team look like when it's at its best in optimal form?

DYAISHA FAIR: When we're playing free and doing what we do best and within ourselves, like Georgia said, knowing our roles, knowing what we're good at, and when we do that and not worry about the score or any mistakes that we make along the way, that's when we're at our best.

Q. Obviously your school used to play here all the time, but has not in a long time. Can you talk a little bit about what it's like being able to stay in the northeast

Q. You guys didn't find out who you were playing until last night. Can you talk about what that means in terms of preparation? Is it a good thing to be able to watch them last night, or was it a bad thing in that you didn't know who you were playing until today?

DYAISHA FAIR: I think it was neither good or bad. I think it's March; you never know kind of who you're going to play until a day or two before, especially once you make the run. I don't think it was a good or bad thing.

Q. What have been the major focuses in practice just coming off the ACC Tournament and kind of ending earlier than y'all would have hoped?

GEORGIA WOOLLEY: I'd say just getting locked into who we are. We know who we are as a team, and coming off the ACC Tournament not the result that we wanted, so just getting locked back into those things and getting better at them in practice leading into this tournament.

We pride ourselves on a lot of different things. We want to be better on the boards, strong on the boards, boxing out, rebounding, running, things like that. These practices we've been going really hard just getting prepared for those things and getting back to the team that we know who we are, and I think we lost that for a second there, but we're back.

Q. Dyaisha, what were your first impressions watching Arizona, and what do they do well?

DYAISHA FAIR: They're going to be really scrappy. They're hungry, and they're a team that's never going to



for the first two rounds and then what it was like walking into this arena and looking up and seeing all the banners and knowing what you guys are going after and what that meant to you?

DYAISHA FAIR: I can't lie, I don't really know the history really behind Syracuse and UConn, but I did notice that they've played here quite a bit.

Being in an arena like UConn's and knowing their history and to see that we get to play against and compete against the best shows a lot about who we are and what this program has become, and I think that, again, we're able to compete, and seeing that we're here, that is kind of a confidence booster to help us get ready for the games.

Q. Dyaisha, I know you still have games ahead of you. Have you thought at all, though, about just your place in helping bring Syracuse back and being able to start this next chapter for the program, and after that history and doing it with Coach and what all that's meant to you? Have you been able to reflect on that at all?

DYAISHA FAIR: I try not to get too caught up in certain things, but of course you always want to come into a program and make an impact. I think that I am an impact player for any program, but to be a part of Syracuse, which is right down the street from where I'm from, is another thing to look back at.

But I haven't really tried to reflect on it yet because we're not finished, but looking at it a little bit right now, it's kind of something special.

Q. Can you talk about the relationship that you and Coach Jack have, considering some of the things she's gone through this year and the amount of time y'all spend together and kind of grown together?

DYAISHA FAIR: It's funny, every question I've been getting lately has been that. She's like my best friend, over time. It's like my best friend and mom away from home for sure. Coming with her from Buffalo to Syracuse was one of the best decisions I've probably made in my career. With that, I think it speaks volumes on our relationship, the things that we've overcome, the things that you guys will never know about that we've gone through. It's just something that's helped our relationship grow and get us where we are and be able to fight through adversity and things like that and get over humps and bumps throughout the journey. It just does nothing but build what you have and build what you're trying to have and create.

Our relationship and the bond that I have with her is unmatched, and I know that it'll never be like anyone else's

with anyone else.

Q. Georgia, you've watched that relationship sort of grow up close and sort of maybe seen how special it is. You have your own relationship with Felisha. How unique is the one that you see between her and Dyaisha, and what's special about it?

GEORGIA WOOLLEY: Yeah, it's special. When I came into college, I was a freshman and Dyaisha was a junior, and that's sort of the relationships you see when you're being recruited, and it speaks a lot to who Coach Jack is as a coach and as a person. That's something that you want to be involved in with a program. So seeing the relationship that she has with her players and student-athletes, I saw that with Stephanie Reid when I met her in Australia. It's the things that you look for in a coach and in a person, and that's what made me really want to play for Coach Jack, and I've only seen that relationship develop 10 times more, especially when Dyaisha came to Syracuse, and I think it just says a lot as to who they both are as players and people and coaches.

Q. Obviously you've been in the NCAA Tournament with Buffalo, now you guys are veterans here at Syracuse. What did you learn from that experience a couple years ago, and as veterans on this team how are you guiding your team towards a unique situation that most people have never been in before?

GEORGIA WOOLLEY: Yeah, so obviously we've been in this stage before so we've learned a lot from that, and then I think just having that experience we can share that with our teammates and bring that into the games following in the next few days.

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I'm just excited about being back here with my alma mater in postseason. This is something that when we first got to Syracuse, Jake Crouthamel, the AD at the time who helped create the Big East, this is what he said we were all about. We were about postseason. Everybody from the janitor to the secretary to the president, the chancellor of the university understood that assignment.

To be able to honor that by building this thing as quickly as we did to be a postseason team, it's a shout-out to the person who created the Big East, and that is Mr. Jake Crouthamel and all the people that's been able to help us grow this program at this incredible level.

We have a big task ahead of us, and our goal is to -- we certainly want to win, but ultimately we want to make people that really love this Syracuse place, help make them very proud.

Q. Coach, Dyaisha was just up here talking about the emphasis of playing freely going into the tournament. How have you guys learned from what happened at the ACC Tournament to kind of get back to that level of playing as free as you were in the best stretches of the season?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I just think that every day you win and you learn, and we certainly learn that we have to start better.

Last year we learned that we had to end better. We were a terrible fourth quarter team, and the last few games we haven't been the best first quarter team.

We have been in our practices doing drills where the goal has got to be reached, and if you don't reach the goal, you've got to run. So we kind of Pavlov's dog that the last few practices to get us starting a little bit better but also ending better, as well, keeping that forte as well.

I'm excited about what we've been through for the last four or five days. I'm glad that they had some time off. We were the last team standing, if you will. We went 18 games straight without a break, and as a new coach, you don't really understand, how do you get a break. You have to bid. I didn't know anything about that.

For two years in a row, I'm like, why do we keep not having a break until the last weekend. I finally had an aha moment and I got asked for it. We're continuously learning and we're continuously growing, and I tell our players all the time, they're going to continually learn and grow but they're going to see it very clearly from their coach because there's going to be a lot of mistakes I'm going to make, as well, and if I'm what we call a phenomenal woman and I can make mistakes, it's okay for our players to go out there and play free and ultimately make mistakes but learn from those mistakes and don't make that same mistake again.

Q. Coach, obviously from the time you got to Syracuse, the goal has been to win, and you want to build a championship, as you've said multiple times throughout this season. What does it mean to you to have these players in this position in your second year with the program, and what does it say about the culture you guys are building here at Syracuse?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Our culture is CAB. Character is always going to be first; academics is always going to be second; and then basketball, I think that we have some great coaches and great players, and we think that together we can kind of grow basketball, as well.

But it's important that we keep the character in place. As an older coach, my 35th year, I really think it's important that we help young people become not necessarily when -- not necessarily first for Syracuse but ultimately for these young ladies to grow into phenomenal women when their brain is fully developed at 25, to know that they can caretake a home, be the breadwinner of their families, and for the next 70 plus years of their lives, they can ultimately lead if they have to.

That's what I'm doing here. I'm trying to help young people grow into young women, into phenomenal women, into being the breadwinners of their families. If we can win some games, great. I'm a coach; I think you win when kids like Dyaisha become young ladies and young women, like Georgia, and they get it. The lights come on.

For us to get this situation where we are right now to win and also get the character and still have eight kids on the ACC all-academic team, that's a testament to our faith, our God, our players and our coaches.

Q. Coach Jack, you all have thrived this year on the underdog mentality, being picked towards the back of the ACC. How have you maintained that family mindset, being the favorite team for this first game?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Well, just got to get interviewed by Syracuse and you'll ultimately realize that we still have work to do. The only questions I've been asked is about why we failed, why we were 1-3 the last four games, not how we became 23-7. We weren't asked about how Dyaisha has been nominated and elected to three All-American statuses. We weren't asked about why Georgia Woolley is on an all-defensive team. We weren't asked about Alyssa Latham and her prowess as a rookie and her ability to shine but fall short a little bit because she is a rookie but then ultimately come back and do such a good job on a big stage.

When I'm asked questions, I listen and I don't forget, and I realize that there's a lot of work to do. People aren't believers of Syracuse women's basketball yet, and we'll continue to grow this thing, and maybe they'll join us, but that's not our whole locker room mentality. Our locker room mentality is what we have is what we have, and what we have will be enough. That's in this locker room. All we care about at the end of the day, at the end of the game, at the end of the practice, if you can look in the mirror and know you gave it your best effort, you're a winner.

This is how I know we have work to do, from the questions that's been asked of me in the last few days.

Q. Is there anything about Arizona that really sticks out to you in terms of what threats they pose as an opponent? Is there any opponent that you all have played earlier this season that you see any similarities to in terms of trying to game plan and figure out how you can maybe split their weaknesses or get around their strengths?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: That's a physical team out there. They defend from one baseline to the end. They're relentless defensively. They've got some great players.

The one thing that I get -- I'm a mom, and I get emotional, and I get really emotional when I know who you are. So what we have a tendency of doing, no disrespect to anyone, is sharing numbers of what their jersey says, so we won't get too attached.

So that No. 13, young lady from their team, she is a thief, and anytime that she's around that ball, you'd better recognize that she's going to steal it. That's something we worry about because she's very smooth with it. She doesn't give a lot of energy, but she has a moment when you relax, she's going to take it.

They've got a great point guard in No. 2, All-American in high school, young lady who knows how to play on big stages. She's probably been playing on a big stage for four years in high school.

They've got some great punches. They've got 12 who can shoot the three and get inside the lane. They've got some bigs, 33 comes off the bench, 25 who's tough. They are a really well-tuned team who's been to a Final Four with the coach that they have right now.

We have our hands full, especially if we think about them, and what we're going to try to focus on is who we are and what we can bring. Defensively they're strong, but offensively we're pretty special, too. It's going to be a battle of who defends and who can push that ball and make that ball go in the hole.

Q. Can you just talk about what it means to have this All-American leading this team and what she has done to help bring you and this team to where you wanted to be so early in your tenure?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: You know, my coaches and I have been together for a long time. One of my coaches is back there, Kristen Sharkey, she actually played for me and has been my assistant for about eight, nine years. I don't even know the number after a while. But we made a pact when we went to Buffalo: We're going to find the kid that's under the rock, that has a story to tell, that really

wants to fight every day so that somebody sees her.

When coach Sharkey said this young lady named Dyaisha Fair is in Rochester -- first, I love Rochester because of what Cierra Dillard did for us on this stage, and we said if we can go back there and find somebody that special, we're going to get her or at least go and try, but when I went there with Coach Sharkey, we realized we didn't have a lot of people next to us, and nobody recruited her. I think we're the only Division I school that recruited her.

But I knew her story, and I knew that she was the oldest of four children, and she had to help raise her siblings with her mother who was a single mother, and she had to make certain they'd go to class and get in school, and some days she didn't go because she was too tired getting them ready.

When we got her we said you have to be selfish because we need you to come in the front door of Buffalo, not the side door or the back door, and we're going to give you a special permit. You have to do the work. And she said, you're the first person that really saw me, and she believed in us because we believed in her, and she trusted us because we were putting trust in her.

From day one she came out and she gave us her best effort, and it's a blessing. It's a God wink in my opinion. What we have received from her is not even close to what you see. This young lady is the most humble young lady you ever want to meet, and her academics, she took herself above a 3.0 for the last three years, and she cares about the fabric of this team.

She kind of likes her coach a little bit, too, and that's something you don't get because when you're 18 to 22 years old, all you care about is why are you telling me what to do. She's always asking what do you need me to do. You don't find a lot of them. That rock is gone.

She's sent me a text the other day, she said, hey, Coach Jack. I said, yes, D. And then she said, "can I have this last dance," and then of course I'm just a baby, and I cried and all that crazy stuff. And I said, of course, D.

She just really, really cares. She knows how to push the buttons. Not so you get soft but so you can embrace what's happening. This is our last ride. Let's let it ride.

Q. Lexi McNabb, we know about her history at Syracuse. You coached her mom, I believe, correct? But also her cousin won two National Championships here at Connecticut. Can you tell me a little bit about Lexi and what you've seen from her and what you hope she can contribute, maybe not this year but so much

more in the future?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Lexi is a Dyaisha Fair in my opinion. I learned about her because I knew about her mom and dad. When I went out and watched her in Phoenix, same similarities, not a lot of people recruited her. I was at Buffalo at the time. I just saw her wanting somebody to see her for who she was.

When I started communicating with her, I noticed she never used her last name. I said, why don't you use your last name. She said, I just keep forgetting. I said, you're not forgetting. You want your own identity. I get that. We got her to come to Buffalo, and she committed to Buffalo, then we got on this next stage, and it kind of made sense but I needed it to make sense for her story.

I knew that she wasn't going to play right away because of all the people that was in front of her. She had some work to do. She still has some work to do. But one thing I notice is that flickering of that light that comes on defensively against Dyaisha. She's up in the gym every day playing against Dyaisha. She's going to be a person that you see on that court because she really wants it now. The light is kind of in her eyes. It's on. It's still flickering in our capacity because we're coaches and we're very honest coaches, but I really think that bloodline that she has is going to reveal itself very soon. I'm excited about her future.

Q. I was wondering just as a veteran coach, what do you see from Paige Bueckers that makes her so special for the game?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Other than everything? That's too broad of an answer? Paige is special. She can shoot it, she can rebound, she can make the pass, she can rally her team. She's a hard worker; she'd the first one in, the last one to leave the gym. There's nothing short of -- I just don't know why her name isn't being as visible as other names that's being talked about throughout the season.

One thing that she has that's a little bit different is that she plays within the system of Geno Auriemma who's the man that everybody shows up that's on that floor, and anybody on any given day could be great. The reason why I know is because he recruited me to Virginia.

So I just think that you are don't see her greatness as much as you see the others because she plays within an amazing system with a great coach who's growing her not as a basketball player only but as a young lady who has to understand even if you become the COO of your corporation, you still have to have room at the top to share with others. She does a great job of sharing that ball,

sharing that light, and then every now and again she gets Big East Player of the Year.

Q. During your wins over these big teams of Notre Dame, Louisville, you guys were averaging 75, 76 points a game. You've kind of hit a lull, scoring in the 60s. When this team is playing at its best, what is it offensively? How do you try not to get sped up against a team like Arizona?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: We want the speed. That's when we're at our best is when you speed us up and we're not thinking.

I think the problem has been if you notice the people that played us and we lost, they sat back in the zone -- I mean, in player to player and allowed us to kind of walk the ball up, and now we're thinking and we're thinking too much. We love each other. Georgia wants more success for Dyaisha, and Dyaisha wants more success for Alaina, and Alaina wants it for Alyssa, and now we're overthinking the game. Well, you speed us up, we don't think, and we're pretty darned good.

I'm looking forward to the speed of this game. I'm looking forward for us to go out there and play free and not think so much and trust that no matter what I do, my teammates are going to believe that I'm doing this for the sanctity of this team, and I think when we do that, we're shooting the ball 78 times a game, we're pretty special.

Q. You got a lot of love from Orange Nation in that sendoff yesterday from Melo Center. Just having a chance to play here for the university you played at, your alma mater, the place you're from, what does it mean to this program to have a chance to play on this stage?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: We were here before, and we played when I was at University of Buffalo, and we got to the second game, and the crowd here is a veteran crowd that absolutely understands what women's basketball looks like, feels like, and the respect that the crowd has, it cheers for everyone. Cheers louder for Connecticut for sure, but I just really am so humbled by the crowd and the ability to play in front of people that understand women's basketball, wherever that is in the world.

I was in Spain watching one of our players over there, and the respect that they had for the game and their professional maturity about women's basketball was just amazing, and I sense that about this crowd here and this place here.

The one thing that we want to show while we're here is that



we respect them enough to give them our best effort. Our hope is that we show our best effort.

Q. You talked about speeding up and playing fast. Have you given any thought to inserting Kennedy Perkins a little bit more? In some of those comebacks earlier in the season when she was bringing the ball up and Dyaisha slid over to the 2, you guys had a lot of success. What would your thoughts be on that, potentially against Arizona and their stifling defense?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Well, we don't give anybody anything that don't earn it, and the last four days in practice Kennedy has earned the right to be out there. That helps us out a lot.

But I think it's important that we teach lessons, even at the price of not making everybody happy, and I think that KP has really honored that and really gotten to the point where she's given such effort that when she got a little sick and she wanted to practice and slow down so she wouldn't miss a minute. I'm hopeful that we have an opportunity to get her out there because she has earned the right to be out there, and my hope is we go out there and she'll see her best effort.

Q. When you were talking about bringing Syracuse back to the postseason and even just considering the success you guys had in the ACC, is this the sort of timeline you envisioned that this team was capable of? Did they surprise you in any way? How would you assess the speed with which you've been able to get Syracuse back to this spot and if anything has kind of surprised you along the way?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I'm just one of those crazy coaches that believe winning is easy. It's the process that's hard. Sometimes when you go through the process, you're going to take a dive. I think we took our dive, and I think that we've learned some lessons. Any day I can represent my community with the Orange on my chest, anytime I can represent our university with Orange on my chest, anytime I can represent the athletic department here at Syracuse, I take it very seriously, and I never think it's too soon.

As a matter of fact, last year I thought that we should have been in the tournament, and I think this year, there's six games to play, why not us. Why not now. Our goal is to continue to learn the lessons through victory.

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