

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Jackson State vs UConn

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Jackson State Lady Tigers

Coach Tomekia Reed

Keshuna Luckett

Miya Crump

Media Conference



think everyone else will follow behind.

MIYA CRUMP: I totally agree. We have the experience as a team. The majority of the team that went to the tournament came back to the team. As she said before, it's really nothing new. For the new players, we just have to continue to be a leader, continue to just show the confidence that we have in this program, the confidence that we have in the game plan, the confidence that we have in each other as teammates.

Q. Can you just talk about what this appearance means to your school, to HBCUs, to the league? Do you feel that pressure, and I know you guys had kind of a tough ride in here, but what was it like coming into the arena and seeing all the banners that hang here and being what is considered one of the meccas of women's college basketball?

MIYA CRUMP: Quite honestly, this is the third time we've been to the tournament, so I wouldn't say we're surprised.

Basically coming into it, it's always an honor as an HBCU coming into the NCAA Tournament to represent HBCUs as a whole, so I wouldn't say there's pressure but it's definitely an honor to be here.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: I would say it's just an experience. We've been here before, so it's nothing that we aren't really used to, so we're really prepared, and we're not here just to be here.

Q. Having this experience of playing in the tournament before and facing a really tough team and playing them really tight, what do you think you got the most out of that experience, and what have you told your teammates about what it takes to compete in this sort of setting?

KESHUNA LUCKETT: As players who have been here before, like we're experienced, we've been here, so our teammates, they're looking at us for leadership, and we provide that. We offer leadership.

As long as we offer leadership and we look up to par, I

Q. You guys played one of the hardest non-conference schedules in the country this year. How did that slug really prepare you guys to come play a team like UConn?

MIYA CRUMP: Non-conference was very eventful. But nonetheless, it helped gel us as a team. It helped create this identity for us, which is defense, and we just took that into the actual season, and hoping to take that into the postseason, as well.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: Like Miya said, the preseason was very competitive. But since then we added new pieces. We've been gelling. We've become more of a team now that we've added a lot of new teammates. With that new gelling and all that, I think it made us a better team and made us believe in each other.

Q. You'll be playing a team that basically plays six players, has a very limited bench. How do you think your style matches up with that, and in terms of do you try to get teams in foul trouble? Is that something you're going to be looking for? Do you think this is a team that is vulnerable to your style of play?

MIYA CRUMP: I can't tell you my game plan, but we most definitely do match up well with UConn. All credit to them for making it this far, as well. But it's just another basketball game. We've just got to go and play basketball. That's it.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: They've been playing all year with those same players, so that doesn't really matter. We're all basketball players at the end of the day. The toughest



team, the person who wants it the most, when your adrenaline is pumping and rushing, I don't really think the time matters. I think you're just playing and you're out there having fun.

Q. What are the sorts of basketball things you've been focusing on leading into the game?

KESHUNA LUCKETT: They're trying to get our game plan.

MIYA CRUMP: Pretty much mainly we focus on us. We look at what we lack as a team and we try to implement it into the practice plan.

Now, when it comes to the other team, of course you have to focus on what they do well, as well. You have to respect them as an opponent. We try to work on what they do well, try to see what we can counteract to that. But we can't say our game plan.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: I agree with her. As a team we really focus on the things that we do well and we can do better, but we also focus on the things that we don't do well, and we try to get better at it every day in practice. We're always pushing each other. Every day it's a competition.

We don't really want to focus on the things that we already do. We want to just get better.

Q. I had a conversation with your coach the other night in Angel, and one of the things I asked, talk about the significance of playing on ABC for not only Jackson State, your program, but just for HBCU women's basketball in general.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: We all know HBCUs, we don't get the coverage we should get, so playing on ABC, I think it's a wonderful opportunity and experience for all our fans and our supporters to watch us play and do what we do.

MIYA CRUMP: I don't have much to say except I'm grateful. It's totally a blessing to play on a platform as big as ABC.

Q. You all spent the year as the hunted in the SWAC. For the media, can you share how difficult was the SWAC this year because sometimes people look down upon that conference, but obviously a team like Grambling State that won the NIT last night, they beat Arizona State, Southern beat Oklahoma and Arkansas-Pine Bluff beat Arkansas this year. Talk about how challenging it was night in, night out to go through the SWAC you were able to do it, and what was the key for that?

MIYA CRUMP: My first thoughts before the season even started, I noticed that a lot of big recruits were coming into the SWAC, and I honestly was happy for the other teams because it evened the playing field.

But preparing for those teams every night, it was different. It was different every time. Like the SWAC gets looked over a lot, but the SWAC is very competitive, very physical, competitive conference. It was a long season.

KESHUNA LUCKETT: Me personally, I've been in the SWAC for five years, my whole collegiate career, so I've seen the come up, more skilled players coming into the league, bigger players. I think people underestimate it because I'm not really sure, but it is very physical. It's very physical, very competitive, and it's just -- you see what we can do when we're given the chance. I'm just really proud of the teams who's been making the postseason efforts.

TOMEKIA REED: Just truly excited to be here. This is a wonderful opportunity for my program to be back in the NCAA Tournament after losing last year and not being able to make it.

But to be here, it seems like every year we come and have to play the legends, the biggest coaches in the league. Truly an honor to be able to coach against Geno tomorrow in our game, a really good UConn team, a team that has a lot of freshmen but they are freshmen who work extremely hard for him, a very good solid program that they run.

Just for my players, it's been our focus to do what we've done all year, be great defensively and be able to execute down the stretch offensively.

We are just honored to be here and excited for the game.

Q. Can you talk about the matchup with a team that only plays six players, and how do you exploit that, without giving away your game plan? Your players just seem so confident and sure of themselves. I assume that's something you've instilled in them and will serve them well.

TOMEKIA REED: Absolutely. I thought our players did a really good job in their interview. UConn is really good with those six or seven players. They understand their roles. They know what they're supposed to do. They're a very disciplined team who does not get into foul trouble, and if they do get into foul trouble, Geno does a great job of pulling and putting the right players on the floor.

For us, we don't look at the fact that they have six or seven players. We look at what they do offensively and

defensively and what they bring to the floor.

I think we match up well with them. Each player, height for height, pound for pound, I think we match up well with them. I think they are an aggressive team, and we've seen some aggressive teams this year in preseason, and we've seen some aggressive teams in our conference.

Overall I think we will be prepared for them, and we do stand a chance with a good matchup with them.

Q. One of the hardest non-conference schedules in the country this year. What was your intention in putting that together, and what was the biggest learning experiences from that stretch of losses you guys had?

TOMEKIA REED: You know, in all honesty, I really thought we stood a better chance in preseason selecting the teams that we had to choose from.

We are not afforded the opportunity to play teams in conferences who are at the bottom of the conferences like other teams are. Schools don't really want to lose to Jackson State University. So we have to go out across the country sometimes and play the top No. 1 teams in the league, the top 10 teams in the country, and so we had great height in Daphane White, who's no longer with us, and Angel Jackson, we had a really good team in terms of depth, a lot of Power Five transfers on the team, so we thought we would do a better job against those teams.

But early on we struggled with our chemistry. We struggled with players accepting their new roles. We had a lot of transfers who had to accept their new roles, and we struggled early.

But I think overall we struggled in preseason, but it helped us identify who we are and what we're capable of, and so going into conference play, we were able to build from that.

The players had enough pride and enough understanding to know that we are the bar in the SWAC.

We had to quickly pull it together and get players to understand their roles and buy into those roles. But I think our preseason schedule prepared us to have a 21-0 season in the conference, and right now we're in the top four for the longest Division I win in the country. So our preseason schedule prepared us for that, so we are just hoping it carries over into our game versus UConn.

Q. Coach, I asked your players a similar question, but having the experience of competing against a top program in the NCAA Tournament and being really close in that competition level, what do you hope the

players that were part of that can take from that experience two years ago, and even as a coach, was there anything that you learned that you hope to take into this tournament today?

TOMEKIA REED: Yeah, it has been a journey, and as I have been sitting back and evaluating where we've been in the tournament since my first appearance versus Baylor, Kim Mulkey, we've changed a lot. We've changed the defense. We've changed a lot. Instead of just letting the players be who they are organically, be who they were coming into the game after 21 games. We changed, so I learned from that.

After playing Kim Mulkey again at LSU, we went into that game with a lot of confidence. All year I told my team after losing to Baylor by 50, we will be back in the NCAA Tournament, and we will not be blown out like that again. Because it takes away -- it takes something from you. When you win your conference and you come into this tournament and get blown out, it's like, that's not how we identify. That's not who we are. We're not going to walk away with our heads down. We are still a good team. We are still a good program.

We were able to build on that going into the LSU game. We came into that game two years ago with a lot of confidence, with a lot of composure, and I felt like as a coach, I could have made some different decisions in terms of playing my big girl a little bit longer, when we went up 10 with three minutes to go in the game. I learned from that. My players learned to keep their composure. We kind of wanted to fight the officials on some of the calls they were making.

So we learned overall as a group.

That's what we have been talking about, things that we have to get better at going into this next game.

Q. Why are you proud of your program, your young ladies? Why are they special, not just as basketball players but as young women?

TOMEKIA REED: You know, my team is really special because I have a lot of players who have been through a lot. One of my players' parents were evicted. That player also, her career was taken from her last year because of oversight in our academic department. I've had players who had a lot of injuries. I've had players who had to fight through that. I've had players who transferred from places where they weren't treated as people. They were treated as a product.

I've had players who have been through a lot. When they



came to Jackson State University, one of the things I told them they would be walking into is a family. They were walking into a system where the coach believes in them as a person, where the coach loves them as a person, where we're going to go over and beyond.

It's not just about winning and losing with our program. It's about developing great student-athletes and preparing them for life after college.

These players get that. They get it. Because we put so much emphasis on our love for our team and our love for our family, these players run through the walls for me.

This is a special team because you have to be special to come in and lessen your role to fit the greater vision of the program. That's what I had a lot of players do. Miya Crump from Houston had to come in and accept a new role. Andriana Avent can start for any team in the country, but she came to Jackson State to accept a role off the bench.

To be able to hold on to my good players and not lose them to the transfer portal says a lot about them as people and says a lot about my coaches and my program.

This is a really special program because we've taken a lot of bumps and bruises in preseason. It didn't go the way we wanted it to go. We wanted to win more games. We wanted to be competitive in more games, and we couldn't. That hit me hard as a coach, wondering what was I doing wrong.

For this team to come together and say, Coach, we're going to get it right, we're going to get it right going into the conference, we're going to regain our trophy that we lost, we're going to regain the respect that we lost, and we're going to be fine, that takes a special team to do that, a special staff to do that.

So I'm just extremely thankful for this program. This has been one of the most exciting teams for me to coach in my career at Jackson State in six years. It's been exciting. It's been fun, a lot of confidence, I don't worry with this team. I know what I'm going to get out of them. This has been a really good year. That's why they're special to me.

Q. You've talked about playing against the LSUs and the Bayers and the Texasas, but kind of a different animal when you walk into an arena and there are 11 banners hanging above your head. Have you addressed that with your team? They don't seem like a team that would be intimidated much, but do you address where they are and playing in this kind of arena and the game is sold out and what that's going

to mean? A lot of teams walk in here and they're down 10 points before the ball is even thrown up.

TOMEKIA REED: Absolutely. It's very impressive. I'm excited to see the banners. I haven't seen them yet, a National Championship banner. In six years at Jackson State, we've put up eight banners. We're extremely excited. It's not a National Championship banner, but we're knocking on those doors.

We just don't really focus on that. That's not really a big concern. Texas is a -- Vic Schaefer does a great job. Kim Mulkey does a great job. But we're not playing the banners, we're playing the program, so we've just come in and do our best job.

Now, you are right, we do have to consider coming into the gym being down 10 points. We have to consider all of that. But we can't allow that to frustrate us. We have to let that be our driving force.

I told our players, what stage would you want to be on than the big stage against the best in the country to ever do it. This is what we want. I would have loved to have gotten a 12 seed so I could see a different animal, but Geno it is.

We're excited about it.

Q. You mentioned a few times just that your group is really motivated to get back to this stage after missing out last year. Can you elaborate on that and how you saw that continue to drive them throughout the season even after a little bit of a rocky start?

TOMEKIA REED: You know, I tell my players all the time, the most skilled team will not win big tournaments. It's going to be the toughest team.

Last year we were not the toughest team. We were the best team skill-wise in our conference. But we were not the toughest team.

We let moments slip away where we could have been tougher, moments slip away where we took for granted, moments slip away where we wanted to take a break. There's no taking breaks in tournament play. There are no moments where you can ever relax. There are no moments where you can ever think that you're the big dog. You have to be tough the entire time because at that point it's win or go home.

When Southern shot a step-back three from a player that normally does not shoot threes and make it, I couldn't be mad. I was like, wow, like, oh, we're going home. I told our players, you have to be tougher.



Now, I will say this. My coaching staff, we took that to heart. I struggled from it.

I as a coach -- let me tell you guys this. As coaches we know what our teams are capable of. We know what we're going to do at any given time because we see little moments throughout the season that will show our weak spots, and I will always see those weak moments and I will try to tell the team, hey, if you don't change, somebody is going to get us, and sure enough, that's what happened.

So going into that tournament last year, I knew we were holding on by a small string because we weren't disciplined as we needed to be and we weren't as tough as we needed to be. But my coaching staff, we took that to heart. We went out and recruited tougher players. We went out and recruited better players and players who could bring the trophy back home. So that was our journey.

But every day we came to school in July, we started workouts in July, our players heard about Southern University and that trophy every day. I talked about the dreams. I was having nightmares waking up in sweats watching somebody take the trophy away, and I would tell them about that.

Any moment where they wanted to be a weak moment or a moment where they wanted to give up or take a play off, we reminded them, taking plays off, we lost a trophy. You have to be tough. No plays off.

I was thinking about one of our players, she did an interview last week, and she was phenomenal in her interview. She talked about how the school she transferred from, defense wasn't a big thing for them and how defense at Jackson State, you have to play. That's the only thing that's accepted.

I can remember our first practice, she stopped and said, Coach, I'm seeing stars, and I said, well, you'd better connect them because it's time to play. We've got something to go do. We have to win this tournament.

We talk about it all the time. All the way up until tournament time, we didn't talk about it anymore because we wanted the players to be relaxed and have fun.

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