

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

**Arizona Wildcats**

**Coach Adia Barnes**

**Skylar Jones**

**Breya Cunningham**

Media Conference



**Q. For both of you, how do you feel having played one game already in this venue? How does that prepare you for tomorrow? Does it give you an advantage, and how are you guys balancing rest and preparation when you've just come off a big conference tournament and now you've had to play a First Four game?**

**SKYLAR JONES:** To answer your first question, I actually think it was good we got to play a game before because we got a feel of -- we're freshmen, so we've never played on this stage before. This is our first NCAA Tournament every, so I feel like for us it was good to get a little feel of the game, get a little rust off because we haven't played since the Pac-12 so I think it was good in our advantage so we could get warm and feel the courts, the rims, things like that, and get back to playing like how we've been playing.

**BREYA CUNNINGHAM:** I think it's good that we played a game in here just getting used to the atmosphere and things like that, like Skylar said. It's our first time on this stage, so getting used to that.

But honestly, for me, I feel like it doesn't really matter because it's a new team, so I feel like I go based off of each game. Like each game is a new game.

**Q. Whether it's yesterday dealing with foul trouble or just the season as a whole dealing with a short rotation, what has kept you guys going and being able to overcome all the adversity that you've been dealt this season?**

**SKYLAR JONES:** I think we all really love each other and we want to do it for our seniors and let them go out with a bang. We know we do have seven people. That's not going to stop us. We just want to do it for them. All three of the February, we're getting a lot of experience, so this is also going to help us in the long run, but we're all really a close-knit group and we have each other's backs, so I think that's what keeping us together. And we want to do it for Adia, too, make her proud.

**BREYA CUNNINGHAM:** Yeah, I would say as the season went on we just got closer and closer together with all the

**Q. Breya, last night was a little tough for you. You came out and you were playing strong like you do, going straight up and everything, and then you had a little bit of foul trouble. What kind of things is Coach Adia talking to you about right now about how to read the refs and see how they're calling a game so you know exactly what maybe you can and can't do out there to be able to stay on the floor a lot longer?**

**BREYA CUNNINGHAM:** We haven't really talked about yesterday yet because I'm assuming we're going to talk about it in practice today. But like during the game, she's just -- we don't really change up our game plan. We're always going to be aggressive, we're always going to play aggressive defense, so it's just a matter of me being smart and figuring out what to let go and when to be aggressive, just learning how to read those moments a little bit better because the refs are never going to change, so it's just a matter of me learning to play with them.

**Q. In those moments do Es or Isis help you be a little smarter? Do they give you any tips about how to do that in those moments?**

**BREYA CUNNINGHAM:** Yeah, I think Isis and Es are the first people I go to when I'm in foul trouble because Es is always in foul trouble with me or Isis. One of us is always in foul trouble. They're always telling me like what Isis told me yesterday during that game was no matter what Coach says sometimes, if you feel like you're not going to be able to make the read or make the play and get a foul, just be smart and learn how to give up things. Isis was telling me just be smart and do what you feel like you would be able to do to not get the foul.



adversity we went through, so this group of seven we're just playing for each other. When we go out there, it's not about us or one single person. We're all doing it for each other.

**Q. How cool is it that you have gear that says "ten toes down"? Second, could you explain that for the people in the room who don't know what that means.**

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: Ten toes down is kind of like something that we as a group kind of -- it's like our motto as the season went on. Just ten toes down in everything we do. We're doing it for each other. It kind of just means like ten toes down, like we're standing for us kind of.

SKYLAR JONES: Yeah, ten toes down, it's like a saying that we had. We're only telling it because something was happening, we were just telling Adia we're ten toes down, which is like we have your back, like the eight, seven that you have, we're here for you, we're going to do it for you. We're going to hold it down for you.

Then that's just a motto that kept going on throughout the year, and it just shows how tight-knit of a group that we are, that we have a little shirt that says it. We have it on our white boards and everything. It's just a really important saying for us, and it means a lot.

**Q. Brea, how difficult has it been for you playing perimeter defense because I know you picked up a couple yesterday there, and it's something new for you. How are you progressing on that, and how comfortable do you feel?**

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: I feel like I'm getting better at it. Obviously I still have work to do because I always foul out every other game. But I feel like it's something that I'm getting used to, and it's how we play, so we're always going to play aggressive defense, so it's something I'm going to have to learn how to do if I want to continue to thrive in this system.

It's been hard just learning how to play with rest and everything and learning when to, like I said before, learning how to let certain plays go and everything. But I think I'm getting better at it.

**Q. Skylar, you guys obviously did a great job with Honesty yesterday. You've got another good guard with Syracuse with Dyaisha. How are they similar or dissimilar from your perspective?**

SKYLAR JONES: They're both really good three-level scorers. They're very quick. They can get to the basket and create their own shot. I feel like they're similar in that

aspect. They're just really good players overall and they're smart with and without the ball. They know how to move and things like that. They're just both really good overall players.

**Q. Will you do anything new or different --**

SKYLAR JONES: Yeah, every game we play is going to be -- there's going to be really good players, and I feel like we've played like the Jujus, the Honestys, the Dyaishas, so I feel like it's just going to be another one of those games where there's a lot of elite players and a lot of elite scorers, and we've just got to play the defense that we know how to play.

**Q. On the lighter side, how have you guys been dealing with the distractions that the state of Connecticut brings you in terms of weather and the long bus rides to and from the venue, and how has it been the last few days being here?**

SKYLAR JONES: Honestly, we're just grateful to be here. Despite all of that, we're just grateful to be here. There's a lot of teams that would like to be in our position, so it's just go to be grateful and not complain. I mean, it is a little cold, but that's okay.

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: Like she said, we're just taking it all in, just enjoying the experience of making it to the tournament. Happy to be here. Like two months ago nobody really thought that we'd even make it to the tournament, so the fact that we even have the opportunity to play these games is fun.

The long bus rides, I just see it as a chance to take in the scenery, I guess.

**Q. It's a bit of a big picture question, but being freshmen and getting used to what Adia requires from you on the defensive end and obviously seeing how that was able to transpire yesterday, how would you describe what she requires of you defensively and what that Arizona brand of defense looks like?**

BREYA CUNNINGHAM: I would say what she wants from us is just to give it our all. She just wants us to just play hard, give it everything we've got. She knows we're out there giving it all we have and just trying our best, but yeah, I think our brand is just aggressive and just -- I don't know. I don't know what I'm trying to say. You can go.

SKYLAR JONES: What Brea said, Adia wants us to play hard. We have a lot of different defensive principles, but at the end of the day, she just wants us to play hard, deny, watch back-cuts, screens, talk and just communicate and

play as a whole.

**Q. You guys talked there about communicating, and there were some hard screens yesterday that maybe the communication wasn't so great. Did you guys talk about that, about what you need to do better in those situations?**

SKYLAR JONES: I mean, we do get hit by screens sometimes, but I feel like the communication does be there. Sometimes you just can't hear it, which is something we always talk about, that we need to improve on, being able for the other people to hear you, but other than that I feel like our communication is pretty like up there, with the posts telling us what screens are coming, how to switch our feet and things like that.

But there's always room for improvement.

ADIA BARNES: Survive and advance. I'm just happy to be here another day. Fortunate. I thought yesterday we fought. It was definitely a physical game against a really good team. Just have to find a way to get wins at this point. So really happy for our team and proud because this is a really young team, and we battled.

**Q. I know you spent all last night and all this morning scouting Syracuse. What makes them so tough? What are you seeing from them?**

ADIA BARNES: Well, I think one of the things is obviously when you have a dynamic player, it's really hard. But I think what makes you think and have to be on your toes against Syracuse is all the changing defenses, so playing against the 3-2 or 1-3-1, a 2-3 for a long period of time can wear on you, and you have to think and look for gaps, and they play kind of like a matchup zone, so we're going to have to be smart and hit shots from the outside.

I think there's so many challenges. Every team is different.

One of the positive things I can say about being in the tournament is the Pac-12 prepares you. So in the Pac-12 it's unlike every other conference where we play Friday-Sunday. So we do this all the time, with seven players, with six, whatever. We do that in the Pac-12, so I think you see success in the tournament because of that. Other people play Wednesday-Saturday, Wednesday-Sunday, and we don't, so I think we're used to the turnaround. We're used to having this day in between as a walk-through, a mental focus versus like a physical practice.

I think we're prepared, but we know they're a really good team. Coach Jack has done a great job with her team, and

we know we're going to have to play.

**Q. For the emotions of yesterday, you got your career 150th win and then --**

ADIA BARNES: Which I didn't even know that going in. I was like, wow, that was that hard for 150 wins. I'm looking at Tara like ooh, I don't know if I'd make it to 1,000.

**Q. Coming off of that, getting a win with this group and having to really grind it out, what was that like for you? You mentioned how proud you are, but really to see your team be able to grind through that and be able to pull it through.**

ADIA BARNES: I mean, really special. I think a lot of people, they weren't sure if we were going to be here. We knew we thought we should be here. But just proud. We start three freshmen, and freshmen make mistakes, and freshmen are freshmen. They always say the good thing about a sophomore is they're not freshmen anymore.

But I think that we battle, and I think you can't measure heart. I don't think we're the most talented team, but we fight, we play for 40 minutes or however long it takes. We played a ton of overtime games this year, but very proud to do it with this group.

We play seven. They play a lot of minutes. We fight. We never give up.

I think just to go in yesterday -- it was a really physical game, and it was funny because we're known to play pretty physical, but the Pac-12 is not nearly as physical as the SEC, and that showed yesterday.

But just to go out and with foul trouble still find a way. Just proud. Helena I think has really stepped up and led us. She's the only player that's remaining from the Final Four team. So it shows.

She has poise and composure, and she's a leader, and she kind of took over at some points in the game.

We're just finding ways to win. Jada didn't play her best game offensively, but what she did was she wasn't hitting shots so she attacked the rim and got to the free-throw line.

This team is so resilient, has so much heart, and those are things that aren't measurable. Just proud of getting this win. It felt good.

**Q. I know you deleted the tweet, but it's not the first time we've heard about --**

ADIA BARNES: What tweet?

**Q. The tweet about how far away the --**

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I wasn't saying -- honestly, the NCAA has been amazing here. I have a lot of friends I know on the committee, and the group has been amazing. I just was saying it's a far drive. It wasn't to be critical. It was just to be factual.

**Q. Can you just address some of the distractions, though, of coming here, which is far away from hotels and restaurants and things, and also --**

ADIA BARNES: It's far away from Tucson, too.

**Q. I was going to mention it's also a little bit different climate than your team is used to.**

ADIA BARNES: Very different.

**Q. And how they've been dealing with that kind of stuff.**

ADIA BARNES: I mean, we don't care. You could have told me we were going to Afghanistan, and it didn't matter who we play, where we play. We would have been ready for everything, anything.

But to go across the country two time zones, it's not easy, but it's not an excuse. We'll still find a way. The good thing about freshmen, they don't know the difference. They'll just play.

But I think it's hard when you're an hour away. For us it's cool -- after you've lived in Arizona, you go anywhere and you freeze. You get like soft. I don't know what it is. I came from Seattle. Seattle I was used to the rain and stuff, but anything after being in Arizona, you just get used to -- we left, it was like 70, right? It was 70 and sunny, and we came here, and it's like 40.

So it's just different. But I think that's the great thing. We're on the road, there's some adversity, but if any team can handle adversity, it's Arizona. We've lost half of our scoring this year. We've had people quit. We've had people removed from the team, and we still find a way. Driving an hour is nothing. We get more time to bond. So it's actually a good thing.

**Q. Having so many freshmen on the team and this is their first experience so they don't know any better, how have you noticed how they've just rode with the waves of when it comes to playing in the NCAA**

**Tournament and handling adversity but also being up for the challenge?**

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, so I'd say the first thing is that they're prepared for this moment because all year they've been playing and getting minutes and getting experience in a really hard conference. I think facing all those great teams every game and winning teams like really close, losing multiple games by one point or in overtime against teams that are way better than us, I think it gave them confidence, and I think they know that we can play with anybody.

I don't think they really knew what to expect, and so they just go out and play. But I did not see anything -- I looked in their eyes, I didn't see Jada nervous, I didn't see Brea nervous or Skylar. I think just their mentality and their want to win and their hearts -- we always say their fight is there. Those are things you can't measure, and I don't think -- if you look at us as far as talent-wise, you'd say we're probably the least talented in the Pac-12. I was saying you can't measure heart, you can't measure toughness and you can't measure mentality. I think one of the leaders as a freshman is Jada, and Jada is a fierce competitor. She's a leader as a freshman, and we're molding her to have a bigger role in leadership.

I think when she first came, she would be kind of scared to say things, and we give her voice. We empower her. She's just grown in that space, and I love it.

To see a freshman doing that -- I'm just excited to see what that's going to look like in the future.

But they're our foundation, and this is a really solid foundation. I think that as a coach, there's challenges. If you get these McDonald's All-Americans that don't play, what's going to happen. They're going to transfer the next year. The good thing is no one complains about playing time right now and they all play, and there's opportunities.

I think when I look at the big picture, this is setting up something special for later because my teams are the best and we've been together a while because our system is complex, and we're better when we can grow together like that Final Four team we were together three years. So I see this group being that.

Now we just add some pieces to it. But these freshmen are really fun to coach. We've lost some games where I've been like -- I'll give you an example of how young we are. There was a big game, I think it was against USC, and we had two young players -- I'm not going to say their names because they might be embarrassed. But we're at the free-throw line. So usually you'll pinch and be on one side

or double pinch -- two people guard one on both sides if they're really good rebounder. Well, I had two freshmen double pinch the shooter, and I was like, no, you never double pinch a shooter because they're shooting, you would never do that. They were like, oh, we didn't know. But they're just young. They don't know certain things or don't know situations, and they're learning.

I'm like, wow, they're learning every day.

That process has been really fun because I'm seeing them improve. Skylar is a different player than she was a month ago. Just to watch that process has been really fun.

**Q. Last night you found out that a member of the Seattle Storm family passed away unexpectedly. What did she mean to you?**

ADIA BARNES: Well, she was like head of finance. I didn't even know she was still working there, actually. She was there years ago when I was there. It's just sad. I think whenever someone isn't old and obviously you just don't expect it, I feel sad for the Storm family. I was a part of that organization for so long. The owners of the Storm married me twice -- I'm married to the same person but we got married twice. We haven't been divorced. I just am really close to that group. Just sad, heartbreaking.

**Q. As your roster has sort of shrunk, did you consider changing your defensive approach at all, and what made you decide no, we're going to do it anyway?**

ADIA BARNES: No, because I just looked at -- I modified. We absolutely have changed. Just because by necessity and personnel.

The way we play, we can play 11 players easily. We have modified on-ball defense, not pressing as much. But I couldn't completely modify because we weren't going to be able to score. So we weren't the biggest team.

If we then changed our whole style, I don't know how we'd manufacture points. For us to be able to steal and go in transition, that's just kind of what we had to do to score. If it was going to be a half-court game and play in the quarter court, I don't know who's going to -- we don't have a go-to player. So that wasn't going to be a strength, and we would end up losing a lot. As it shrunk, just had to be smarter.

I've grown as a coach this year. It's really challenged me because we have not been able to practice for two months. So it's just been walk-through, it's been more intentional about things and cutting things down. Like today we'll do a walk-through for like 30 minutes, and being conscious of

saving their legs or else they couldn't sustain this.

I don't know how Helena does it. She played 39 minutes yesterday. I have to find a way to probably give her a couple minutes here and there, but she wants to play -- sometimes I'm like, do you need a break? She's like, no, I'm good. I see her eating these chews and stuff because she's a diabetic so she has to test like every 30 minutes. For her to do that -- I think they just want to win and they want to play for me. I think they just are going for it.

But I'm trying to do what I can to minimize the impact in every other way. Today we sent some kids to cryo. You guys don't know what cryo is? It's painful. Thank God I'm not them because it hurts for three minutes. But just sent them to cryo and doing recovery off their legs, really short practices. So players are happy. If you're a player and you know you're going to play and you're not going to practice a lot, that's like the perfect situation, so we probably will have no transfers this year. Maybe not. But just being smart and just maintaining them.

**Q. Adia, everyone talks about your defense, but with offense, I was looking, and everyone has improved since Pac-12 play as far as their production except Brea because of her foul situation. What do you have to say about the way the team has come together and been more maybe unselfish or whatever you'd want to call it?**

ADIA BARNES: So every time there was some sort of change, I think it just brought us together. I think we have a really cohesive group that really plays for each other, and they play for us as coaches and they care.

I think that as you saw shifts in the program and people get hurt, I think it just made people want to fight more and do it more, and I think for -- well, they made this slogan up, this ten toes down was when we only had six players at one point and I was talking to the team in the locker room, and then the girls said -- one of them said -- it was actually Jada. She was like, we're ten toes down, we're all in it for you. We're just going to play. We don't care if it's five, six, seven, we got it. It was really a powerful moment. So I made sweatshirts for it and stuff. But it was powerful because they were like, whatever it is, however many players we have, we're going to go, and we've got you. We just got better.

Sometimes there's addition by subtraction, and it is what it is. I think that our unselfishness, our cohesiveness, our togetherness shows on the court through our defense, because if you're not a cohesive unit, it shows in defense. If you look at all fragmented teams that play defense, if you're not together, you don't have each other's back,

you're not going to play defense, because you're not giving help, you're not going to do the hard things, you're not going to rotate or you're not going to help the helper. Those are things that show, and I think it also shows an offense with giving up shots, giving up a good shot to get your teammate a great shot.

I think those things show on the court, and I think what's showed is that we want to play for each other. We're unselfish. Helena is probably the most unselfish player I've ever coached, or she is the most unselfish player I've ever coached. It's not about her. It's not about her stats. It's just whatever it takes. Different people have stepped up on different nights.

I think it just shows the care and the chemistry we have.

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