

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Arizona Wildcats

Adia Barnes

Skylar Jones

Helena Pueyo

Media Conference

Syracuse - 74, Arizona - 69

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Arizona, head coach Adia Barnes, student-athletes Skylar Jones and Helena Pueyo.

ADIA BARNES: First, I want to say I'm really proud of my team. We battled and played a really good team. Syracuse is tough, and Fair is a really good player. I see why she's All-American.

We had opportunities to win, but credit to them, they took us out of our rhythm. Their zone really disrupted us. Congratulations to Syracuse.

I just don't think we should hang our heads because we had seven players and we fought and we had chances to win. So I'm proud of our team.

Q. This one's for Sky. You seemed to find -- you've been aggressive for a long time, but you seemed to find that rhythm today that you were able to take those drives, draw some fouls, score a lot. What were you seeing today in what they were giving you?

SKYLAR JONES: They were playing a pretty spread out zone, so our goal was to get the ball in the middle and then just penetrate from there.

So when I got the ball, I was in the corner or a little bit to the elbow so I could see the gaps in the middle, and I just drove there. That's what I was really seeing.

There were threes open, but I just wasn't hitting them. My



teammates were. So I was trying to get them the ball so they could shoot the threes, like Helena was hitting three, Jada and them. So I was really just trying to see my teammates and drive when I was able to and passing to the post.

Q. I know you guys don't want to make any excuses, but can you talk about what it was like playing so long with just seven players, and did that eventually catch up to you guys in the fourth quarter?

HELENA PUEYO: I think it's just we're used to it because we've been playing with seven people for a long time. We were tired, but we knew it was an important game. I think, as Coach said, we just fought until the end. It is what it is.

Q. Skylar, just this whole experience of being thrust into this role as a freshman and getting the NCAA Tournament experience under your belt, what do you think you'll take the most from it?

SKYLAR JONES: Just the whole experience, and really my seniors because they're the reason I got here because in the beginning of the season I was kind of nervous. I wasn't driving, shooting, doing anything. So they really got on my butt about it, and coach gave me the confidence to do what I'm doing now.

All of my teammates, my freshmen teammates, they're playing so much better now. We're such a cohesive group. That's what I'll take into it because we need to have a team that's just as cohesive and probably go farther next year.

Q. Helena, two things. One is how amazing were these freshmen, not only all season, but tonight? They played lights out. You saw Brea pull down a big block. She was just really strong tonight doing things, and what Skylar has done and what Jada has done in taking over a leadership role and everything else.

HELENA PUEYO: I think they were amazing today, and I think they were amazing all season. Especially Skylar tonight, she was really aggressive. She was playing really hard. I think it's good for them to get experience for the



next years, and I know they're going to be great players.

I mean, they're playing like seniors now, and I didn't see myself like that when I was a freshman. So I'm just really proud of them. They are going to be great.

I was just trying to like give them advice, just like with my experience, but I think they're playing really hard and really good.

Q. Then the tough one for you, Helena. This was your last game wearing a Wildcat uniform. I don't know if you could put it into words. It's hard for me to even say that because I've watched you play for five years. How do you feel in this moment?

HELENA PUEYO: It's hard right now, but I never wanted this moment to end. But I learned so much from Coach Adia, from Coach Salvo, from all the coaches. This is my family. They're always going to be my family. I'm always going to be a Wildcat forever. I'm going to miss them, and I'm going to support them.

It is what it is. I'm really sad now, but I'm just going to keep working and keep playing basketball.

Q. For both of you, Sky talked about the zone, and earlier in the year that gave you guys a lot of problems, but you shot 47 percent against it tonight. What was better as the season went on and specifically tonight?

HELENA PUEYO: I think we were really like better in the zone defense. They were like really spread today, but especially for the whole season, I think just attacking more at the gaps and finding the open shooters.

SKYLAR JONES: I think this time around in the season we weren't as stagnant and not as nervous to attack the gaps. Syracuse is really long and big, so it was kind of hard to see where the gaps were because they were really athletic too. We got better at being aggressive throughout the whole game than we were at the beginning of the season.

Q. Can you just talk about maybe a moment that you're proud of from throughout the season or where you're seen the team grow the most?

HELENA PUEYO: I think a really big moment for us this season was against Stanford when we beat them. We showed people that even with seven players, you can do big things. Then since now we've just been working like really hard. With seven people it's also hard and especially with three freshmen.

So that's what I mean when I say the freshmen are playing

as seniors, and they've done a really good job. But I think that was a big moment for us.

SKYLAR JONES: I was going to say a big moment for us would be the second time we played USC in the Pac-12 tournament because I feel like that's -- we had mojo before, but I feel like that game, even though we lost, we played our hearts out for the second time, and they're a really, really good team. It's really hard playing good teams with seven people because we don't have as many subs and as much rest.

So I feel like that was a big turning point for us when we were able to sustain a game with them for two games in a row.

Q. All season long, your coaches, the scheme and the style of play is to pass the ball on offense and to keep passing it to get that great shot. We've seen you improve all season. Tonight it looked like you took a huge step up again. I mean, every game you guys have improved on offense and on defense. What were you feeling tonight when you were doing that because it seemed like textbook?

SKYLAR JONES: I just wanted to win. For the seniors, I really just wanted to win. I felt like we were doing everything we could to win, but we had a few lapses and a few turnovers that hurt us. Then the momentum of those charge fouls and all those other fouls kind of snuck away from us.

But I think overall we had such a great season, played really hard, did everything that we could do, and we shocked the world by even being here.

HELENA PUEYO: I think we gave everything we had 100 percent. I'm just really proud of them. I'm proud of my team, and I think they're going to be great next year. They've just got to keep working.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you so much for your time.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the gauntlet this team has gone through, especially with the three freshmen, and what that means for the future of your club?

ADIA BARNES: This time of year you always play with your seven, like you play with your horses. I think where you feel it is like sustaining that. So we got in foul trouble. Then it's hard to sub, and they started to kind of chip away from that ten-point lead.

I think it's just the accumulation of minutes throughout the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

season. So Helena playing 40, 50. We had so many overtime games. I think then in this period, they're just tired. So I think it wears on you.

But you do go with your seven, but it helps to have that other eight, nine, ten players when there is foul trouble or before that third foul because us taking out Esmery and Brea really hurt us. Because then they started to make their run, Brea started off really strong, so having more depth helps.

Then in practice I think where we're feeling it because we haven't been able to practice for a couple months, just not having people available. So those things, I think, throughout the season hurt you because like habits like boxing out. We had a tough time boxing out today.

When you're practicing every day and you have the depth to do that, then you can focus on fundamentals and little things. Then not being able to do that, it shows up in tight parts of the game. Or the fundamentals of jump stopping, those things when you're not practicing those habits, it's in these games where you're exposed.

So I think that's the hard thing about the seven players.

But what we've done with who we have I think has been remarkable, and the way they've played day in and day out and the way they've fought and put ourselves in this situation, I'm really proud of.

Three freshmen gained tremendous experience this year, and this is something I can't simulate in practice every day. You can't simulate this stage. You can't simulate this setting in the tournament. So this will pay dividends later on.

It's funny because, when we had 15 players, I was like I'll never have 15 players again. Now that we have 7, I'm like, okay, we need a lot more players. So now I'm back to wanting more players again.

We did what we could. Helena played 40 minutes day in and day out. When it was overtime in some games, she played 50 minutes. We track our players' mileage and stuff, Helena had almost seven miles. I don't know what today is, Saturday. On Thursday she had seven miles, so the turnaround to Saturday, and she played another 40 minutes. I can't take her off the floor.

In those moments it's difficult because she needs a second for that mental break, and I think it's the mental fatigue that wears on you throughout the game and you have high intensity and high emotions, and you saw that with us leading at three minutes. It's the turnovers and those

things down the stretch.

But they got that experience. We'll learn from it. We'll have more depth next year for sure but definitely a great foundation to build off of.

Q. Sky, we talked about how early in the season she'd throw her head back and get down on herself. How much have you seen her improve, and how did she do that?

ADIA BARNES: I think a lot of it's from experience. We used to talk a lot throughout the season. Sky early on would make a turnover, and she'd be like oh, like her body language and her mentality.

Teaching her throughout her game experience and stuff, you don't ever want to show your opponents how you truly feel. You don't want to show when you're tired. You don't want to show when you're really frustrated. You don't show your emotions.

Having learned that, she's grown so much, and that's why she's played better. Great players, we always say, have amnesia. If you're a great shooter, you don't think about the last shot, you think about the next shot. If you make a mistake, we always taught her you have the ability to defend, so go get it back on defense. Those things, she's grown so much. That's why she's able in the NCAA Tournament game to be 8 for 14 and have 24 points.

We didn't think she was capable of this a couple months ago. I think the combination of playing a lot of minutes, playing through mistakes because some of that is because of necessity because of our numbers, but she's proven she deserved that. She showed up for us, and she's helped us win games.

So I'm really excited and optimistic about the future because her coming back, she's just going to continue to get better, and she's improved so much throughout this year.

Yeah, just proud of her mentality and her approach to everything. She's done that, I haven't done that.

Q. Did you like what you saw from your team defensively along the way?

ADIA BARNES: I did for like 36 minutes. I didn't like the last few minutes much, but I did the first 36.

Q. What happened the last three or four, and specifically with Dyaisha, she has that reputation for being that fourth quarter player, what did you see from

her in that stretch too?

ADIA BARNES: I really liked the way that we started the game. I thought we started off the punch first. We always talk about that. I think we controlled the game. I think we then controlled the game second quarter.

That's when having seven players wears on you because having young -- and three of them are really young -- to start because what happened is we got in foul trouble. Then that makes us change things. So then when we had to sit Esmery and Brea, it hurt because we had a ten-point lead chipped away, so those things hurt us. Then it forced Helena to be at the 4, and Helena is much better at the wing for us.

Those things shifting hurt. So us to have the ability to be solid with discipline is essential especially in these games. I loved the way we controlled it, and we kind of weathered the storm for a while, but Dyaisha having fouls, whether they're warranted or not, that's just the way the game was.

But if you don't do something silly early, then a foul that's called that you can't control it, you still stay in the game. Brea having fouls, Jada, Esmery, it's hard to play the way we want to play. Then we start to become more passive, and then we gave up a lot of drives.

Did not like how we contained the ball in the fourth quarter. We were letting non-shooters -- we don't usually play so far off. We were popping back and still allowing drives. That really hurt for a couple of reasons because then our post players are starting to help. Then they got dumped past us in the post or they were in the position for offensive rebounds, and that killed us.

Having the ability in games to contain and to pop back and not allow drives, we have to be able to do that. We're going to learn and get better from that, but those things hurt.

Then when you have a player like Fair, she has the ability to take over a game. We don't have a player like that. We don't have a player like Fair, where go get a bucket, go create space. And she wasn't getting a lot of times off pick and rolls, she was getting a lot of time off creating space and just hitting shots. She's really good, and she's really hard to guard.

That was a big concern coming in, and she just really took over the game. She hit a three, hit a really big two, and we just couldn't bounce back. It stings a little bit more obviously when you leave -- I don't know exactly how many minutes we left, but leading it with three minutes, it's hard. Then we couldn't stop her.

Definitely something we learned from. I think it's good for our freshmen to see what this level is about and see what the tournament is about and go back and get better.

Yeah, I'm just glad I don't have to see Fair anymore.

Q. It looked like you stopped her for just a quick --

ADIA BARNES: We stopped her while she was resting, but she wanted to take over in the fourth quarter, and she came alive. No, we made her work, I thought, for her shots.

Q. In the handshake line, did you give her a message off the court?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, she's a really good player and she's had a good career and good luck in the rest of the tournament.

She's really good. She's fast. She has handles. She's really good at distributing the ball. She does a good job of creating space and hitting some tough shots, and she took over the game.

She took over the game when it mattered, and that's what stars do. That's what All-Americans do. That's what pros do. They take it over in the moment when their team needs it.

We just don't have that player. We're going to get that type of player, and when we were successful, we had that type of player.

We've made that type of player with Helena. Helena is a pass first player. She's one of the most unselfish players, but we've kind of made her a go-to player, but that's not really in her nature. Her nature is to facilitate. It's unselfishness. That's why she's great at the 1. So we've made Jada this scorer. Jada is a point guard. She wants to distribute.

So we don't have that experienced player that can take over a game inside or outside. We will develop that, and we will with our young players, but we just don't have that, and Fair did that. So she's really good and hard to guard.

Q. I have to ask a tough question again for you. It's Helena's last game, and how much has she meant to you?

ADIA BARNES: So much. Helena's meant everything. She's been with me five years. I always say the story Helena did not speak one word of English when she came

here. She's an introvert. She does not talk a lot. Now she kind of came out of her Shell.

So to watch her growth, she didn't start for us for three years, started her last two years, and now she's become this star. Very happy she decided to stay with us. She had a three-year pro contract. She turned that down to come to stay at Arizona for her fifth year and get her Masters and play. She has really played like incredible. She's done everything I've asked for.

There wasn't one day in her career, like one day, not one practice -- this is phenomenal -- where she rolled her eyes when I coached her or she shook her head or said something back, not one time in five years, and I'm not lying about that.

She is a coach's dream. She does everything right off the court. She's a phenomenal student. She's a great teammate. She's a leader. She's been my captain for two years. She is a very big loss, and I don't know how to replace her. I actually won't be able to replace her, but it's been great to be on the journey with her. She'll always be family.

I'm so happy that coming back she raised her stock. She's going to be able to go to a WNBA camp and hopefully make a team. If not, she's going to be a star in Europe. I'm just proud of her and her growth, but that's what coaching is about. That's what being a coach is about.

You're never going to win enough games. You're probably going to get fired one day. And that's what we signed up for. When you watch the growth of these kids and watch them graduate, and she's fluent in English and talking in press conferences. She would have been terrified her first year. You watch that process and you're a part of something special in a young woman's life, it's impactful.

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