

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UConn vs Syracuse

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

Syracuse Orange

Coach Felisha

Legette-Jack

Kyra Wood

Alyssa Latham

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Syracuse, student-athletes Kyra Wood and Alyssa Latham.

Q. You guys probably haven't been able to really sink your teeth into prep yet just because of the short turnaround, but what do you know about UConn so far? What are you looking at at that matchup, areas where you think you can really shine in that game?

KYRA WOOD: I know UConn is a very systematic team, and we talked about having to follow the ball and see the ball on defense. They're going to swing the ball and get that ball around. They're a very team-basketball type of team. They have their star players, but they all kind of contribute.

And so kind of limiting them to seeing their teammates and seeing those open passes, seeing those down-ball passes, kind of doing what we know we need to do on the defensive side, talking, moving our feet, not falling asleep on defense. Just those little things are going to make us successful.

ALYSSA LATHAM: Really just sinking into our discipline and being disruptive offensively. I think just staying disruptive and disrupting their offense is really going to help lead to the win tomorrow.

Q. Having a really tight game with Arizona that came down to the wire yesterday, what did you learn about your yourselves, about what it's like to play in this tournament from that game that you're going to



hopefully carry into tomorrow?

KYRA WOOD: I think we expected that coming into the game. It's March, and every team that plays in March is going to be a good competitive game. And so we made it a good competitive game. We stuck with it throughout the entire game and we came out with the win at the end.

ALYSSA LATHAM: Having that energy. I mean, it's nothing new that we've learned, it's just doing what we do at Syracuse, being consistent, being aggressive and just matching the same energy.

Q. The way yesterday's game ended, what makes Dyaisha so good and so effective in the big moment?

KYRA WOOD: She knows when to step up to the plate. She knows when we need her. She knows when to step up and really own her role on the team. We have all have our roles. We have our rebounders, our passers, our come-in-and-get-a-bucket people.

And Dyaisha knows that when it's crunch time, we know that Dyaisha can get a bucket. And she just rose up to the occasion, like she does every time, and it wasn't anything that we didn't expect from her.

We were just there to support her and help our team get a win however we could have gotten that.

ALYSSA LATHAM: D is a really great player. As long as we as teammates give her the confidence that she needs, especially as bigs, telling her take your shots, we got your back, we got your rebound. Do your duty. We'll have our hands ready, and we'll just rebound for you.

Q. What's been kind of the biggest area of growth you've seen in yourself, and what was it like to get that first tournament game experience under your belt yesterday?

ALYSSA LATHAM: It's an exciting feeling to be here in March and as a freshman. I'm excited. I'm all the feels: excited, anxious, nervous. I think really just sinking into it and being ready to step into the moment.



For me individually, it's just knowing who I am as a player, being confident in it and doing whatever it is that my team needs for me to do.

Q. Do you guys see a matchup advantage or a strength that you guys can exploit tomorrow, given your strength on the boards, given that UConn's front court is a little depleted. Is that something you think you can get going?

KYRA WOOD: For sure. We talked about how we have a bigger matchup when it comes to their four spot. I know their bench is a little short, and I think that we as biggs have to come and play, make sure we take advantage of that kind of smaller four guard, one big kind of lineup that they kind of go with. So that's what we're looking at right now.

ALYSSA LATHAM: Just owning our power and our size and being big.

Q. Your coach, Felisha, has been here in Storrs in the past in the NCAA Tournament, has always been very complimentary of UConn and Geno. How has she tried to help you guys approach, knowing that this is the history behind the program but also this is just another game for you guys in the tournament?

KYRA WOOD: Just exactly that, just another game. We understand the success that comes behind Coach Geno and UConn and the school in general. But we have to look at just another game.

Any team that got here deserves to be here and deserves the right to earn their extra 40 minutes, and that's what we're going to come to do.

ALYSSA LATHAM: Also knowing this is our moment, it's our time, and it's our time to just stand up and take it.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you so much.

Joining us is head coach Felisha Legette-Jack.

Q. The other day you mentioned that Geno recruited you to play at Virginia 40 years ago, and then you talked about his system that makes him such a successful coach. Can you detail what that system is and why you think he's had the success he's had because of it?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I can't answer all those questions, but I can certainly give it a try. He recruits a certain kind of young lady. Character is very important to him. I can tell academics, strong academic kids. All of

them are amazing students as well. And high IQ for the game.

He has done a tremendous job with those kind of players and what we're building our program on behind as well. He has a great system that he curtails behind the young people that he has for that particular season. He does some things that's very similar year in and year out, but he always have a little tweak because of the players that he has.

So it's a great coach, Hall of Fame coach. And it's just an honor to be on the court with him.

Q. I know you had a quick turnaround from yesterday, but what are your initial impressions on this matchup and the challenges but also the areas where you think you guys have a strength or an edge?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: The challenge is we have to turn it around fast. And I think that's a challenge for both of us. We don't play lots of numbers, neither team. So that's going to be a challenge for us as well.

You know, I just think that they have a high-octane offense where they just kind of want the ball back to shoot another three and make another three and shoot another three and make another three. And we fall asleep, they'll get you on the backdoor layup.

So we have to defensively be locked in, not just for what you do as an individual but as a collective unit, to respect them enough to realize that even though you're going to give it your best effort, there's going to be times when they flat-out score because they've done it against everybody in the country, right?

And so our goal is to stay locked in defensively as long as we can and give it our best shot.

Q. You have some history in Storrs as a program. What is difficult about playing in this building first and just kind of does this feel like a rivalry game at all going back to those old Big East days?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: No, no, you know, I don't do that. I was at a previous institution, and they say this is a rivalry and this is -- wear the school colors on our campus. And I love it for the students there. As an adult, you kind of -- you got to kind of compartmentalize and put it in perspective.

Anytime you can play in front of a big crowd and you're a women's basketball, you got to receive that. You got to want that. You have to yearn for that for your players.

You're trying to build that at your own institution.

And we want our 3,000 fans to turn into 6,000 next year and then 8,000. And then I look forward to the day where the fire marshal comes in and say we're going to fine you because you have too many fans. And that's when you know you've done something special. I know they've done that multiple times here.

I think that Geno is incredible coach. They have an incredible system here. And very mature fan base. And then it was noted yesterday when we were playing and we felt like we were home, and I told our players, I said, Don't get used to that. They have an idea who they're going to be cheering for, and it's not going to be you on Monday.

But it's really neat to see, and it can help us continue to dream on how we're going to build our situation over at Syracuse.

Q. In terms of stopping Paige Bueckers, what do you see out of her that makes her so special, and how are you going to look to slow her down as much as possibly can?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: We're just going to respect her enough to honor what she can do, and that's -- she can score on all three levels, and she can defend and she runs the floor, high IQ for the game. And I can't say enough about her.

And one of her favorite songs is a song that I listen to as well. So she got a real cool musical taste, and that's Gospel music. So you just can't be mad at her. I'm just going to call her No. 5 because it's easier for me to control my own feelings.

I just think that in order to respect somebody like a Paige, like UConn's team, you have to meet them every single possession with the PEP, which is passion every play. And you have to stay locked on ready, have a dribble live stance, where she can take the three, she can go to the nail or she can get to the layup line. And you've got to be ready to go on all three of those levels.

And we're going to be as ready as you can. You don't stop somebody like that from scoring. We just hope we can contain the rest of them, at least somewhat.

Q. (Off microphone)?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Marvin Sapp, "I thank you for it all." Yep.

Q. How did you find out about that?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Well, I saw, you know, a song that she listens too, it was on Instagram, and I said, Wow, that's one of the songs that I really love too.

A lot of people just go through this world and think that everybody owe them something. And that's what makes me mad at Paige because now I like her more because she has this humility about how she gives thanks to something bigger than herself. And that's what I call my God, not certain what -- a lot of people have different ways of expressing that. But I call it my God.

And I think that He's the reason for all the season, and I am -- before I do anything, I thank Him for it and give Him the glory, and I thank Him for it all. And it seems like she does too.

Q. Alaina took a hard fall last night. How is she feeling, and what's her status for tomorrow looking like?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: It's day by day right now. And we're letting her rest right now and making certain that she's going to be able to go for it all tomorrow.

That's the toughest I think she's ever played all season. And it's kind of a misfortune that she got knocked a little bit around. But we think that we can possibly have her tomorrow. We don't know.

But at the end of the day, whoever is out there, they're going to give their best effort. And if she can't go, then the next person in line is going to have to do just a little bit more to replace her because she really wants this and she's really found her niche.

She's a young lady that went to multiple schools, and a lot of people kind of pushed her out and pushed her around. And then she comes to Syracuse, and then the coach that was here is not here either.

And last year the middle of the year I said, I need to coach you another year. I just want to do that. I want to do that for you. I want to do that for us. I want to do that for me. Because I want to see somebody like her feel like people care about her as a human being.

And she wasn't having even a great year at the time. It's just something that compelled me to say that to her. And to have her here with us right now and for her to fly around that court like she did yesterday, it would be fitting for her to be out there with us.

But it's all in God's plan, right, and our doctors' hands and



in hers and how much she can kind of turn this thing around.

So right now we're giving her a day to rest, and hopefully tomorrow she'll be out there.

Q. You talk about wanting to cut down nets, trying to be the gold standard of basketball. You're going up against an 11-time national champion. Along the way, have you taken anything from watching UConn in the past?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I've known him when he was an assistant and he recruited me to Virginia, and I knew when he came here his goal was to make this a powerhouse.

And he's done that. And it has to be a time when others step up, too, right? And in order to do that, you've got to go and continue to respect those in front of you with grace and humility. But you've got to have a fire in your belly that you want it for your team and your program as well.

And that's where we are right now. We absolutely want it for Syracuse, and we absolutely believe the time is right now.

And so we're going to give UConn, not Geno, not 11-time champion, the players as they're right now, we're going to give them our best effort. And whatever that best effort is is going to allow each one of us to go look in that mirror and say there's nothing left.

It could be a 40-point blowout; it could be a 10-point win by us. Who knows. But it's going to be a game that these young ladies are going to give it all and be thankful for it all.

How cool is that? I pulled that one out. Let's go!

Q. Felisha, when you took over --

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: First, you got to stop calling me Felisha because my husband is the only one that calls me Felisha.

Q. It bothers you? I'll stop.

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: It bothers me because the second question you're going to ask me is going to be a weird question, and I'll want to laugh, but I'm not, I can't be laughing at my own name. Next thing you're going to say is Bye Felisha or something. I have one of those names that you can mess around with, right?

Q. I'll stop.

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Thank you.

Q. Yep. When you took over the program two years ago, it was in a pretty fragile place. What was the biggest challenge in sort of getting it here, and did you have to do any repairing before you could even start building?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Yeah, that's a good question. You know, there's a bunch of young ladies that were still at Syracuse and were making decisions on whether they're going to stay or not. And when they shared with me that they would rather try somewhere else, I apologized on behalf of our university, I apologized on behalf of my alma mater on what they had to endure to make them have to leave, to me, the best school in the country.

People to me -- it shouldn't be a viable option. It should be a destination to come to Syracuse. And for them to want to walk away, they must have had some really tough challenges that they faced when I wasn't there.

And then the second thing I had to do was find players because we only had four. Only four people stayed. And we brought in eight mid-majors. I don't -- I never looked at myself as a BCS coach or a mid-major coach or even a high school coach, because I've been all three. I'm just a person that's the shell that He chose to coach young people, to tell their story.

And so we brought in these young people, the only people I knew that can come and play for us. And they ended up doing pretty well.

I'm also a crazy enough person to believe that winning is easy. It's the process. The process is the most difficult. The waking up time after time every day, the 6:00 AMs, to have to tell kids they've got to run, even though they tried but they missed a shot and they've got to be -- Pavlov's dog them.

And that process is not for the weak at heart. Even coaches. I see some of my coaches, they look a little tired because this is a long season. And so that's the hard part. Winning is easy. We never talk about losing. We talk about winning, and we learn.

I don't know if this is a difficult task. I know I'm enjoying every single day of it. I love our team and our kids and our coaches. I love our administration, our chancellor. So funny, our chancellor was so into the game people were trying talk to him and he just stayed locked in.

We've got people that really are locked in. And I think that

most people say it's like a long -- we did a lot of work in a short period of time. I don't feel like I've ever worked even through the bad days only because I just love what I do, and I love the people that I surround myself with.

Long answer. Sorry about that. Do not say Bye Felisha, please.

(Laughter.)

Q. Coach, in the way you talk about Paige, it feels a little bit similar to me in the way you talk about Dyaisha. What kind of similarities do you know in the games and the two as people as well?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: I don't know Paige personally. But I do not Dyaisha personally. And it's personal about her story to me. And so I can only say to you that I can assume who Paige is, but I know who Dyaisha is.

Dyaisha is a humble, fiery young lady who deserves it all. Her work ethic, her ability to give of herself to her family, her friends, to make certain her teammates are okay.

She's a watcher. You can even watch her play in a game. And I was asked the question, why does she only take a couple shots early on? She assess, okay, how is Georgia playing, what does Alaina look like out there. Are the bigs getting the ball?

She is such a big sister in every category. And then when it's time for her to take over, she's a monster, and she's driven, and she knows that she has to save the family. And she will lay it down for the family.

I've not seen a young lady in my 35 years of coaching whose story says to me that it's not a book, but it's a movie. Her story is a movie. And to get to know her is a privilege.

And for her to open herself up to you should be an honor because she doesn't trust a lot of people. She doesn't let a lot of people in. And for me to be on the inside of this young lady's wounded soul who she healed to become one of the -- could be the fourth leading scorer in the history of the game in 23 more points. It's a testament of her ability to get back up again and again and again.

And I'm so grateful that He chose me to be with this young lady. And I can assume Geno can say the same thing about Paige.

Q. You've had a really great season this year, another 20-plus-win year, ACC Coach of the Year. Aside from a win tomorrow, what would fulfill you from your team in

the way that they can perform tomorrow?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: What would fulfill me is if each member of the team can look in the mirror and just say, I gave it my best effort and there was nothing left.

The young ladies that's not playing, if they could -- I thought that I should have got MVP my senior year in college. I had a cast all the way up to my waist. I left it out there. You can pour out even if you can't be on that court.

And so what would be the most fulfilling thing for me, if tomorrow ends our season, would be each young lady leaving it all out there, each coach leaving it out there, me leaving it all out there and we believe there was nothing left, we walk away, and we celebrate.

Q. Coach, we saw Kennedi, Alyssa and Kyra get a lot of playing time yesterday. What worked so well with that group, and can we expect to see more of them on the court together going forward?

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: If it gels, yeah. I love each one of my kids with my whole heart, and this is never going to be about personal like of a young lady, that's why she's going to play more than somebody else.

If it's working and it feels right, it stays right. And I thought Kyra really felt like she had to make an example of her effort.

And there was a time at the end of the game where she fell down and she couldn't get out of three seconds, and everyone is like, Get out of three seconds! And she tried, and so it was a timeout right after that, and I said, Can you go? There was -- she was beat up, tired. And she answered, Yes. And then Dyaisha said, Because we need you. And her body straightened up, and she said, Yes, with a lot more sternness.

So these young ladies are playing for each other. They're playing for me. They're playing for their mirror. And Kyra was an example of that. And KP going four for four from the field and getting pushed off the bench in the blink of an eye, that's a hard thing to do.

You don't know when you're time is going to come, you have to stay locked-on ready. She was ready. If she's ready tomorrow like that -- everyone's number is going to be called because we have short numbers. What you do with those numbers is up to you.

Q. Dyaisha was downstairs using words like "best friend" and "mother," and she said whether it's going to be tomorrow or a national championship game that

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

it does give a little bit more emotion to her when she steps out on the court. So I'm wondering if you could just talk about your emotion as you realize that, whether it's tomorrow or national championship or somewhere in between, this is going to be her last college game and what that's going to mean to you.

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Well, every young lady that I coach is majorly important to me. And my emotions will be different because I'm 57 years old, and so I can kind of handle some of it differently than her.

This is her first rodeo. This is her first time around, if you will, this is her first win, when it comes to hanging out at an institution, academically, taking a test and actually getting those good grades and believing she's a great student, believing she can be a good teammate, and taking the team from Buffalo to the NCAA first round, coming to Syracuse and being recruited by every team under the sun.

The validation that she's received through this game is insurmountable, and it will never -- you know, I think Valvano said this: When you pour out all you have inside your body, it reduces you into an emotion.

And for a young person, an emotion can be tears, it could be madness, it could be whatever it can be. And there's no control when it's that raw emotion. So I'm going to be a little bit different because I know that the other young ladies will be looking, and I need to be a role model for them, and they've got to be able to see what grace looks like under stress like that.

So I'm excited about this opportunity. I'm excited about her trying to play five more games. Let's go to the last second. Why not us? Why not now?

But when it gets to that point, I can only say, and I say this now, but I probably might be the one that she say, Coach, pull it together, Coach, because you're too emotional. I believe I'm going to be more controlled than she is, and she has every right to be emotionally charged because she's done the work, she's validated herself. She has proven to all the naysayers that a little 5'4" young lady from Rochester, New York, can become anything she wants to become if you don't put a ceiling in front of her.

She's done the work, and she has evolved. And there's a lot more room. And my hope is that it doesn't have to take the WNBA four or five years to make a decision on what greatness looks like and they draft her early.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

FELISHA LEGETTE-JACK: Thank you so much for what

you do for women's basketball.

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