

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Maine vs Ohio State

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

Ohio State Buckeyes

Coach Kevin McGuff

Jacy Sheldon

Rikki Harris

Rebeka Mikulasikova

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. For all three of you, no matter what happens this weekend, this is at home. What are the reflections and emotions you have about your final games here?

JACY SHELDON: Try not to think about that. But, no, I think it's special that we get to host here again. The magnitude of it is huge, playing in front of our fans. And then for us, most of us, it being our last time, I think it will make it just that much more special.

We're going to play the same way we always do, but I think a little extra oomph going into this game because, for me and Beks, it's going to be our last time on that floor.

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah, I just agree with that. Very emotional, but excited our fans can be a part of this. So just excited to get out there.

Q. (Off microphone)?

RIKKI HARRIS: Hopefully. We're still working on that right now.

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: Yeah, like they said, I think it's very exciting, also very emotional. We have a lot of fifth-years. So I think it's a very special moment for us to be hosting and have our last two games here.

Q. Question for all three of you. It's been a couple weeks since you were in Minneapolis playing Maryland. Can you describe finally being able to play



again after such a tough defeat and having to wait this long to get to this point?

JACY SHELDON: Yeah, we had a great week of practice. Probably one of the most competitive weeks we've had this year.

So I think just coming back from that, learning from that game, and then just focusing on Maine and how they play and their style of play and preparing for them, I think it was a good past week and a half for us, and we're finally excited to play.

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah, I agree with that. Last week was very tough. But like basketball, you lose games. So we watched, moved on, and now we'll focus on winning day by day.

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: Yeah, I think we learned from our mistakes, and just trying to focus on our next game now.

Q. You guys saw how fast it can end and how easily you guys can be knocked out of the tournament. Did that feeling kind of hit you, knowing that now this tournament is going to be -- the next time you lose is your final game?

JACY SHELDON: You might think different than me.

I don't think about that. That's not something I let enter my mind. Obviously, if that happens, then I'll think about it. But my mind is completely on the next game and how we're going to win it.

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: No, I agree with you. I think we're just trying to be locked in for the next game and just trying to focus on what is in front of us and just take it day by day, practice by practice.

Q. Cotie and Celeste were talking about Emmy's impact on the team. Jacy, for you, what has it been like seeing your sister have such a big impact on all your teammates? And for Rikki and Rebeka, what impact has she had for you guys?



JACY SHELDON: Oh, gosh, it was actually cool watching that interview, hearing all the things they had to say about her and how she impacted them. It's really special. Because obviously she has a huge impact. To see people like them talk about her and the impact she has made on them as well, it's pretty special.

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah, for me it's different. Ask Emmy, we're best friends forever. So that should tell you everything. That's my dawg. I love her to death, and she's amazing.

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: Yeah, Emmy is a very important part of our team. Well, actually, I will never forget, for my birthday, she was singing Happy Birthday song, and she gave me this card with princesses. So, yeah, she's my bestie too.

Q. For all of you, making a deep tournament run last year, what were the lessons you were able to take away from that experience, getting so far into the tournament? And what are you hoping to take from that into this year?

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah, I would say just been grateful, I guess. Last year we had a lot of injuries. And Jacy was able to come back, but wasn't her full self.

I think this year going into it is excitement that we have a healthy team right now, and can't wait to see what we can do and how far we can go.

I need some wood. I seem superstitious.

(Laughter.)

JACY SHELDON: No, I agree with Rikki. I think, like she said, just being -- not taking anything for granted and being thankful that we got a healthy team and we're ready to compete.

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: For me, the same. I think last year during the tournament time I wasn't my best self. So this year hopefully, like Rikki said, we're going to healthy.

Q. Jacy, for you, you're 8 points from 2,000 point mark. I don't know if you know that. What's it been like to see yourself grow offensively in these five years?

JACY SHELDON: Yeah, I didn't know that. I don't want to sound -- that doesn't matter. All that matters now is winning this game. And I think in March, it's so important that it doesn't matter how you win.

I think finding ways to win, and we've done it in the past, but I think it's hard. It's hard to win in March for any team. And I think that's where all of our focus is right now.

Q. What's it been like to see Jacy's growth year after year?

RIKKI HARRIS: That's been great. That's my best friend and my sister. That's been great. If she can score on me, she can score on anybody in the country. And she has a tough time doing that.

She's doing great. She's a fantastic player. I love her.

Q. The last week being tough in practice, was it just an elevated level, were the coaches pushing you harder than --

RIKKI HARRIS: All of the above. It was physically tough, mentally tough, emotionally tough. But it did make us stronger. The team, we came together well. I don't want to say it was us against the coaches, but, I mean, the coaches was pushing us hard, so we had each other to lean on in. That last week set the tone for what's to come.

Q. Has it gotten back to normal now?

RIKKI HARRIS: Practice, yes. But the coaches' intensity, no.

(Laughter.)

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Appreciate it. Good luck.

Coach McGuff, thank you for joining us. We will go straight to questions for Coach McGuff.

Q. When Rikki was up here, she implied she's considering coming back for another season, or at least that's the discussion. Do you know what the situation is with that?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I mean, like with everybody, we wait until the end of the year and have discussions, just to make sure they have a little time to decompress and kind of reflect on the season and kind of see where everyone is at.

Q. And as you head into this first round matchup, what have you seen from Maine as you prepare for this?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Really well-coached team. Very disciplined. They execute well on the half court. They

have, in my eyes, a clear identity of a great point guard, a great post player. And then a lot of people play well around them.

And so seems like they have good chemistry. They share the ball well. And so I think we'll have to really be on point against a really good team. And they're used to winning.

Q. I was asking the players about the intensity of practice last week, because they mentioned how intense it was, and they laughed when I asked about how intense, and they mentioned that it felt like the players against the coaches with how much they were being pushed. Can you talk more about that? And how do you see that as a benefit to them having those type of sessions?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I think just we were so dreadful versus Maryland that I just wanted to remind them that this is kind of who we are and what makes us good, and just the intensity, the focus, the passion that we play with.

And they responded. They did. They know the things that make us good. But just wanted to make sure that when we have a chance to play another game, which will be tomorrow, that we're focused and we're ready to go.

Q. You talk about the post presence. They have a forward who's 5'10", but she's averaging over 10 rebounds a game because she's finding good positions. What have you been working on rebounding-wise to slow down those positions?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, she's very active. She's not particularly getting rebounds because of her height, but her energy, her activity. So you better hit her, you better be physical, you better pursue the ball.

Q. When Rikki was up here, she was talking about the health of the team and literally had to step off to go knock on wood because she didn't want to jinx anything. Anything superstitions you have whenever you're get ready to coach?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Not really. I don't. I think our team, they kind of like to follow the routines. And so I just kind of make sure we stick to that. I think it puts everybody at ease. And so that's really what I more focus on.

Q. And when you look at last year's run, it was the first deep -- you've been at that stage before, but for the players, it was the first time a lot of them had been to that point. What were the lessons that they took away from that that they want to apply to this year?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, just that you've got to -- one, you have to focus one game at a time, one practice at that time this time of year and just make sure you're putting all your energy into the game in front of you. Because there's always storylines beyond that that people want to talk about or can distract you.

But we were really focused last year. And our kids, they focused game by game and practice by practice and didn't let anything distract us.

And I would say that's probably the biggest takeaway. If you allow distractions to creep in, you probably won't be as successful as you possibly can be.

Q. Coach, obviously coming off a tough loss. How important is it to get off of to a good start? And obviously playing at home in the first round, how important is it that you guys get to host this first round coming off of kind a tough loss in the Big Ten Tournament?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I think this time of year it's important to get off to a good start, try to impose your will on the game early on. I think it plays to our style with our transition and our full-court pressing.

It's a great opportunity to play at home. Our fans have been fantastic all year. They've really helped us create an incredible environment here, and I'm really hopeful that we'll have a great crowd tomorrow.

Q. Expanding on that question, how much do you look back this week at the JMU game? Because JMU comes in, it's a mid-major, and they want to try to beat Ohio State. They get off to a really quick start. Is that something that you refer to the team? Because everybody is pretty much here from last season.

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, that's kind of the benefit of having everybody back. They know. They know that, for Maine, they're a well-coached team that is used to winning, like I said. And they're going to come in, and they're going to lay it all out on the line. I can tell you that right now. They're going to play a great game.

We're going to have to play better, obviously. That's obvious. But we need to be ready to go from the start. They'll be fired up and excited, as they should be. If we're not ready to go from the start, it could be problematic.

Q. What changes for you going into tournament time that you're maybe not doing during the season? How does your coaching change?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I don't think anything. Just like I preach to the players, it's like all week at practice, it's this practice, it's Maine, and that's it.

And I kind of think the same thing. All I've been focused on is Maine and helping our kids get prepared for that game.

So just the same stuff, making sure I'm with the coaching staff and everybody has their responsibilities and they're doing their job and giving me information about Maine so I can do my job.

So it's been pretty much the same.

Q. Against Maryland, rebounding was a bit of an issue for you guys. You'll have Eboni back in the lineup now. She's had a penchant for coming in and getting those tough rebounds. What impact will it be for you guys having her back in the lineup?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I think we've probably been at our best when our bench has been good. And we've shown to be a deep team, and I think she adds another player who can come in and really help us.

And depending on how the game goes, sometimes we can play a little bit smaller with her, and I think that can change the game sometimes. Just gives us another option and different ways to play.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much.

KEVIN MCGUFF: Thank you, everybody. Appreciate it.

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