

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Florida vs Tennessee

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

Tennessee Lady Volunteers

Tess Darby

Jewel Spear

Media Conference



out there and play.

THE MODERATOR: Tess, your thoughts on UST?

TESS DARBY: I think Jewel hit all the points. We can't overlook any team once we get here, so we're really focused on them and just coming in and knowing that we have to prepare in order to win.

THE MODERATOR: I'll ask a couple of questions to start. Tess, I believe this is your fifth NCAA Tournament. Maybe your thoughts on what your prior experiences have been like and how they'll prepare you for this one?

TESS DARBY: Yeah, very blessed and fortunate enough that this is my fifth NCAA Tournament. You know, we never take anything for granted. It's a rough path to get here, but it makes it all worth it once you're here, the environment.

Everything is on the line be, but I think that brings out the competitiveness in everyone.

THE MODERATOR: Jewel, I believe this is your second NCAA Tournament. Your thoughts on what you hope to see in year two?

JEWEL SPEAR: I hope to see growth, just having experience here at the NCAA Tournament and having some teammates that haven't been to the NCAA Tournament, so just giving them confidence and telling them that you have to focus on the first game before you can get to the next game.

THE MODERATOR: This is for both of you. Your thoughts on South Florida, your opponent tomorrow night?

JEWEL SPEAR: Yeah, South Florida is a really good team. We're not taking them lightly. We know that they like to shoot a lot of threes, O-boards, crash the rebounds. They play at a little bit slower pace, so we know we have to be aggressive on defense and find ways to play our game going into the tournament.

So they're a really good team, and we're just excited to get

THE MODERATOR: One final question for the both of you. How has your schedule this year playing in the talented SEC prepared you for tomorrow night?

TESS DARBY: I think it's prepared us really well. The SEC is really tough conference in order to compete in. Every team has a different style of play. Some teams like to slow things down. Some teams like to speed things up. I think coming into the NCAA Tournament when every team is different and you don't really have a lot of days to prepare, we've already kind of seen it.

So just knowing what we've done earlier in the season can help move us forward.

JEWEL SPEAR: Yeah, just like Tess said, I think our nonconference and our SEC schedule has prepared us for this moment with the different playing styles, but also, you know, with the losses that we had, the close losses that we had, so learning from those losses and being in those different environments, whether we're on the road or at home. I think that gives us great preparation going into this first game.

THE MODERATOR: Comment on the Tennessee Volunteer crowds because about two and a half months ago this whole town was painted Tennessee orange, when your crowds came up for the football game against Ohio State. I can honestly say there has never been that many visiting fans in this 100,000 seat stadium. It was crazy. It was wild to watch. I want to give both of you guys an opportunity to throw some roses at your crowds.

JEWEL SPEAR: Yeah, honestly I think they're the greatest fans in the world. They travel. When we have home games, they're there. They support us. They're loud.



They get there early.

Like I said, they travel, so we expect to see a lot of fans coming here too. That was a great sight to see. We're an everything school, so seeing football get to this stage and play Ohio State and seeing all the fans come out here, tailgate, and support them was very special.

TESS DARBY: Yeah, I think our fan base is very passionate, and they care a lot about Tennessee, but in particular all sports of Tennessee. I think that says a lot. Especially you recognizing that and seeing how far they travel and that our fan base is honestly the best.

THE MODERATOR: They were outstanding. Questions, please.

Q. We'll start with Tess. Similarly to his question about the fan fervor, how about the proud tradition of Tennessee women's basketball and making another tournament appearance, what would you say to that and continuing that strong tradition?

TESS DARBY: Yeah, I think for all of us we put on the Tennessee jersey with a sense of pride. We know the ones that came before us, but we want to get Tennessee back to where it is, knowing that we're playing for something bigger than itself.

Tennessee I think is the frontrunner in women's basketball, and it's got women's basketball to where it is because of Tennessee and because of the ones that come before us. Just recognizing that we play for something bigger than ourselves and ultimately have a goal is to get Tennessee back.

JEWEL SPEAR: This being my second year here, I remember last year being my first year, and hearing the "Rocky Top" song, it's just so catchy. It's so little to talk about, but it's such a huge tradition.

Hearing that at football games after almost every play or hear it at time-outs of home games or at the end of our wins, that's just something small, but it carries so much hope, belief, and tradition in our program.

Like Tess said, when we put on a Tennessee uniform, there are so many great players that have put on the uniform before us, so we wear it with pride. We just go out there and compete as hard as we can.

Q. Jewel and Tess, you're both fifth-year seniors. What is your sense of urgency right now, and how do you balance that with the emotions of knowing this is your last NCAA Tournament, but also focusing on the

task at hand?

JEWEL SPEAR: Yeah, I think we've talked about that a lot with our sense of urgency knowing, me and Tess, this is our last year of college basketball, but personally not putting too much pressure on myself knowing that. Just staying present in the moment and enjoying the moment with my teammates and coaches, but just making sure everybody stays focused on the opponent at hand and knowing, like, it's a quick turnaround in between games. But focusing on the first game, making sure we're paying attention in film, on the scout, and the little details, that can help us succeed.

TESS DARBY: I think Jewel has hit all the points again, but just having no regrets, knowing that everything we've done up to this point has been worth it. All the hard work, long days this summer.

It's just been a joy to be around this team and coaches who push you to be greater people, greater players. Just going out there, leaving it all out there, but ultimately playing for something bigger than yourself.

Q. We mentioned Tennessee traditions. Tennessee is the only school to play in all 43 NCAA tournaments. It's almost like it's a birthright at Tennessee to play in this event. I know you have some teammates who are first-timers or maybe just one previously. How big of a deal is that streak? It's almost unprecedented if you look at all the powerhouses in the sport, and it's a list of one. If you can both answer that.

TESS DARBY: I think it says a lot about Tennessee Lady Vol basketball. Just the amount of success that's come through here, the players that have come through this program. It's a successful program. It's hard to make one NCAA Tournament, but let alone make 43 in a row. I think that speaks for itself.

JEWEL SPEAR: I think it also speaks to the culture of Tennessee. When you have a good culture, it makes everything else around it much easier.

It's a weird analogy, but it's kind of like a track race, like when you pass a baton. I feel like that's what we do here at Tennessee. When we graduate, we're going to pass the baton to the next group of leaders and group of people, and we know they're going to follow just as strong as us.

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