

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

South Florida Bulls

Mama Dembele

Carla Brito

Sammie PUISIS

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are going to open up the floor for questions.

Q. We'll start with Sammie and go to your right. You did a great thing by winning the conference tournament. When did you switch from celebratory to it's down for business for the NCAA?

SAMMIE PUISIS: I would say it's been business since going into the conference tournament. Getting to the NCAA Tournament was one of our main goals, and now that we're here, we just want to enjoy it, not put too much pressure on ourselves.

We know we can play with these teams. We showed that we deserve to be here, so we just want to have fun.

CARLA BRITO: Yeah, what she said. We have a tough schedule in November, December, so we ready for this. We're not putting pressure on ourselves. We just want to enjoy the moment and also enjoy with this special group that we will have so much fun.

MAMA DEMBELE: Yeah, as they said, throughout the whole year we had this mentality with growing it, and now it's natural on us, and we just want to come here and make some noise and have fun as a team.

Q. As far as what are your impressions of Tennessee and what is it going to take to beat them?

SAMMIE PUISIS: They're very athletic, and they pressure the ball, press full court. We just have to handle their pressure. We have to rebound. It's going to be a full team



effort, but we're ready to go.

CARLA BRITO: Pretty much it's going to be a tough game, but we know they're going to be physical. We're going to do our best. I trust my teammates, so I know we're going to have 40 minutes playing really, really hard.

MAMA DEMBELE: Yeah, as they said, it's going to be a very high-intensity game. Both teams really like to run up and down, so it's going to be just being patient, taking care of the ball, and kind of staying true to who we are.

Q. Sammie, this program is no stranger to the NCAA Tournament, but after missing it last year, how much of that was a motivator for you guys? Does it make it sweeter this time around?

SAMMIE PUISIS: It's definitely sweeter this time. I love this team. To get here with this team, it's so fun. We had some bumps throughout the year, but we've always stayed together, and our bond was so strong. We're all very excited to be here.

Q. Mama, you transferred from an SEC program. What has this year been like for you? Just how excited are you to be playing in your first NCAA Tournament?

MAMA DEMBELE: I mean, it's been amazing. It's been a journey, personal growth, getting to know different people and really get to know them and love them and love this game. I'm very excited to get into this tournament, and especially with this team. It's something that it was out of my mind, like, when I finished. I thought that was it. Having the chance to come back, have one more year and get to experience it is just -- I'm just very grateful for the opportunity.

Q. How do you feel your schedule this year has prepared you for the NCAA Tournament?

SAMMIE PUISIS: It's definitely prepared us. We played against the best and on their home courts, so we have experienced those types of environments, the best teams. I think it made us better going into our own conference, but we also could play with them, so it gives us confidence



going into the NCAA Tournament.

CARLA BRITO: I think it gives us a lot of motivation from the beginning of the year. We knew our schedule was really, really tough, but we were not scared about anyone. We just, like, played hard every time, and now in this moment we know that we're not going to be scared, and anything is possible right now.

MAMA DEMBELE: Yeah, we've proved to ourselves that we can play at a very, very high level, and we can compete against these teams. Just to get here and be one of the chosen teams gives you that confidence that you need, and we're just going to go out there and do exactly what we've been doing throughout the year and play for 40 minutes and just show what we can do.

Q. For Sammie, how satisfying is this, and hopefully there's much more basketball in your future at USF. Personally you transferred and then had a knee injury and that ends your season, and now you're here. Personally for you how gratifying is it to be in the position that you're in now?

SAMMIE PUISIS: It's awesome. I'm very grateful. I've been super blessed with coming back from a tough injury, getting to play another year and having great teammates and Coach Jose helping me through all of it. It really does make this moment special.

I'm just trying to enjoy every second because I know the next game could be my last, but I am very grateful for this entire year.

Q. For Sammie: Mason, Ohio, is not very far from Columbus. Do you anticipate a lot of people coming up? Have you heard from old friends and wishing you the best?

SAMMIE PUISIS: Yeah, I have great support. Like my family, relatives, old friends from high school, AAU coaches, they're all coming. It will be really exciting. I never thought coming back to Ohio after so many years, it's pretty sweet.

Q. You alluded the other night after the Rice game -- or after, excuse me, after the bid came out that you had played on the Schottenstein Center court before. I believe that was your junior year at Mason when you guys went to the state tournament. What are your memories of that?

SAMMIE PUISIS: Yeah, we won in the semis and lost in the Finals. I also went to Ohio State camps, so very familiar with the court. It will be really fun.

Q. Do you have a favorite Cincinnati-based ice cream?

SAMMIE PUISIS: I love Graeter's, yeah.

Q. A certain one?

SAMMIE PUISIS: The black raspberry, yeah.

Q. I was wondering what message you have for young women watching at home who dream of competing at this level one day?

SAMMIE PUISIS: I would just say it takes a lot of hard work, but anybody can do it. I think I was that little girl going to WNBA games or college games and hoping that would be me, and I just was in the gym all the time. I joined so many teams, had the support from my family. That's ultimately what got me here.

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