

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

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Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

South Florida Bulls Head Coach Jose Fernandez

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Coach Jose Fernandez. Please start off with an opening statement.

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I'll thank everyone for being here. Of course, my staff and players and the entire athletic department. I'm really excited to participate in this tournament.

There's an unbelievable amount of work to prepare to host an event like this, and we're pretty excited to be a part of it, so fire away.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Coach, your team has got to be ready for full-court pressure from Tennessee. What's the challenge, the main challenge, that the Volunteers present?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Well, I think when you play the type of schedule that we've played November and December, I think our players and staff were really challenged in those two months, but until you see that type of pressure in person, it's a whole different thing. You can watch them a lot on tape. We've done that, and our players and staff has.

So I think the two big keys are going to be how we take care of the basketball, and we do not give Tennessee extra possessions by turning it over or giving them second, third opportunities.

So we came back. We had some time off during the conference tournament, and we had a couple of practices and then had a good workout yesterday here. We'll practice today, shoot-around tomorrow, but yeah, those are two things that you try and mimic in practice with your male



scrimmage players and did some different things, pressed our guys with seven, eight people on the floor to get a little feel of how patient we have to be and how we have to move the ball against pressure and active hands.

Q. I bet the male practice players are probably saying, as long as Mama is not handling the ball, we can handle them. I know she's an important part. For the women's game, you get units for the first time. With that in mind, are you getting well wishes from around the conference?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I've been a head coach for 25 years, and this is our tenth NCAA Tournament. This is something that is long overdue. Student-athletes, coaches, athletic departments, conferences, our women's game deserves this.

Proud to say I know these conversations came up in a lot of our Women's Basketball Coach's Association meetings. It was something that Charlie Baker really made a valiant statement in the business meeting last year at the Final Four. It's great. Women's basketball has value, and it is now hopefully all around the country athletic directors and sport administrators see the value that women's basketball has, and they will continue to invest in women's basketball. That's the only way this game is going to continue to grow.

So I'm happy. We were all very happy and excited when it was announced and then it was approved. You always want more, right? We all wanted more, but it's a good starting point. It's a great starting point.

Q. Watching the girls in the tournament, their confidence seemed to really go up every game. How do you think their confidence has evolved up to game day tomorrow?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I think our players knew what was at stake. We had gone into won, what, nine, ten in a row, and we had some injuries down the stretch, which you go on the road to Tulsa, and you lose at home to East Carolina, and we played our way out of at-large conversation, and we did. You know, you can't have two losses outside of the top 100 going into your conference tournament like we



did, no matter what type of schedule we played.

So I think our players knew how important going to Dallas-Fort Worth was going to be, and it showed. It showed. We needed to do what we needed to do. I think in all three of those games I thought the type of challenge that we have had all year showed because I think it was only one game we trailed 2-0. We led every minute of the other 139 minutes, whatever it is. Math. 119, there you go. But I was really proud of them and their focus and their execution and their preparation.

Q. Was that intentional, scheduling UConn, Vandy, Louisville, Duke, South Carolina, Mississippi State to get to where you needed to be by the end of the regular season?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Well, it's always been intentional. I think if you look at our schedule every year, we play one of the toughest nonconference schedules in the country, and those are not bye games. Those are all home and homes. I haven't played a bye game in 24 years when I took over the program, so these are all games that -- next year we have Connecticut, South Carolina, and Duke is coming back. We always try and play two tournaments where we can get four games or five games on a neutral floor.

I think that's one thing that you can control. You can control who you play in November and December.

Q. In the championship game in the conference tournament against Rice you played only six players. You had four plays play 40 minutes. L'or played 32. Can you do that against a team that applies as much pressure as Tennessee does?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Joe, it's going to be tough to do. Rice had played three games already. When they played us, it was a fourth game. I thought we were really fresh. We'll get Janette Aarnio back. That will give us another body.

I felt the way that Rice played and the tempo of that game that we could really shorten things and play that group and go with the minutes that we played that day. So I don't know if that answers your question, but I know that the time-outs are a lot longer between quarters, so that's good. I think they're four minutes. Be selling a lot of advertisement, so that's good for the game. We'll be able to get some extra rest.

I mean, how deep can we go? I don't know. You're in the NCAA Tournament, right? Next 40 minutes could be the next 40 minutes and the season is over. Then you have a day's rest for the next game.

Q. You've been around the game for a long time. I'm just curious what your impression is of Caldwell's system at this level and with the subbing and the pressure and the offense? Just what's been your impression of it as you scouted it?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Like I said, it's going to be different seeing it in person, right? The one thing that reminds you -- again, I've been doing this for a long time. When they were at Loyola Marymount, and they played that way offensively, but they didn't play that way defensively.

To play this type of style, I could imagine how Kim's practices are because I'm sure they're very intense, and they're in very, very great condition. That's why taking care of the ball is going to be so very important, so we have to do a great job breaking pressure, either scoring early and making sure they defend us well in the half court.

Now, her goal is going to be to turn us over, speed up the game, make us take weak shots, and hammer the glass. Yeah, it's nothing that what teams have seen it this year. It definitely will be something that we'll have to adjust to, and we'll see. Is she going to sub five in, five out? Is she going to shorten things coming off of a conference tournament? I guess we'll find out tomorrow night.

Q. You have a very veteran point guard out of the SEC in Mama. How key is player like her playing against the kind of pressure that Tennessee is going to put on you guys?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Yeah, she's seen some pressure playing in the SEC her whole career and then coming here, but she's been through it, right? We played at UConn. We played at South Carolina. Played a very aggressive Mississippi State team on a neutral floor. I think Louisville is very good.

She understands how important it is going to be breaking pressure and then making sure we settle down once we break pressure because shot selection is going to be very important. Bad shots lead to bad transition defense, so she's going to have to do a really, really good job tomorrow. I think she's very, very excited because this is her first NCAA Tournament as well.

I think the decision-making is going to be very, very important for her because the ball is going to be in her hands a lot.

Q. For those players who haven't played in the NCAA Tournament, just how do you try to explain to them sort of the magnitude of this and the pressure that it

brings before they get out on to the floor tomorrow night?

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Yeah, because you look at our roster. We're one year removed from the NCAA Tournament. We didn't play in it last year, which is a little different for us.

Carla Brito did, Janette Aarnio did, and Sammie Puisis. They're going to understand real quick when we step out on the floor, and they see all the signage and all the games going on around the country. Nothing prepares you until you play for one.

Once you play in one, there's nothing like playing in one. When you don't play in another one, it's like the season has been a failure. So everybody that will be part of this that hasn't played in one will understand how hard, why the summer is so important, why the preparation is so important, why everything that you do is for this. It's going to be a good teaching moment for the other 11 kids on the roster.

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