

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

Tennessee Lady Volunteers

Kim Caldwell

Samara Spencer

Jewel Spear

Media Conference

Tennessee - 101, South Florida - 66

THE MODERATOR: Kim, if you could open up with some opening remarks, please.

KIM CALDWELL: I've said all year that our team is our best when we're playing as a team and we get something from everyone. I think we did that tonight. I think we had fun. It was a really good stepping stone for us.

We had been a little bit off track, so we needed to kind of get our juice back, and I thought we did that tonight. The next one is going to be a big one.

Q. Jewel, what changed from that first quarter to second quarter offensively?

JEWEL SPEAR: I thought we were really attacking in transition, getting downhill, and then getting inside-out looks and our 3s were falling.

Then I also thought that we made them have to guard multiple actions from side to side. So it made the drives a little easier, more open.

Q. I think more offensively, defensively instead of trading baskets with them in the second quarter, you guys held them to 9 points, outscored them 29-9. What was different defensively for you guys in the second quarter to put the clamps on them? Samara, if you would go first, please.

SAMARA SPENCER: We just turned our pressure up. We knew coming into the game that they only really had one



solid ball handler who was comfortable handling the ball. So just getting her -- in the first quarter we made her turn the ball over some. Then just making other people have to dribble the ball up the court was our advantage, and we just took advantage of that.

JEWEL SPEAR: I'd say that we were very locked in on our scout, and everybody was on the same page. So that helped a lot. Our communication was really good.

Q. Jewel, I wanted to ask you about Samara. I know you guys went through two straight weeks of practice, and Coach mentioned before that Samara does a good job of keeping practices light, keeping it fun. How would you describe her impact on helping the team get through these last two weeks to be able to reset and come out like you did tonight?

JEWEL SPEAR: I think it's huge. She's always laughing and joking, so it just makes it so light-hearted and competitive in practice. Just hearing her today on the bench, like, Shoot it, Jewel, it gives me just a little bit of confidence, and I know she gives my teammates the same amount of confidence as well.

We know how good of a player she is, so her leadership is really good as well.

Q. For either one of you, eight different players made 3-pointers in this game. I assume that's a big part of your offensive output. When you have that many different people capable of connecting at a good percentage from that range, just how difficult does that make it on the opponent to guard that type of attack?

SAMARA SPENCER: My opinion, it's super difficult. We've had to guard people who have multiple people who can shoot, and sometimes we have a hard time doing that. So I know for other people who have to play us, it's really hard.

Especially we have a lot of people who shoot very high percentages, especially at this time in the season, so just being able to like, if I don't have the shot, being able to kick it to Jewel or kick it to Tess. And then we have a couple

other people who can step out and make 3-pointers as well. I think it's just special. It just shows that we all work hard day in and day out to do that.

Q. Jewel and Samara, the 16 made 3s is obviously a program record for Tennessee in an NCAA Tournament game. You both transferred here from other schools, but you're definitely putting your mark on Tennessee, if you could just both talk about the success you've had here and how well this team does shoot from the arc.

JEWEL SPEAR: I think this team shoots really well behind the arc. I think we proved that earlier in the season when we set the NCAA record, and setting another record today was really huge.

It just speaks to our depth that we have on this team, with me and Sam and Tess. A lot of people know that we can shoot the ball, but we have other people on the team that can shoot the ball as well.

Then just being successful here at Tennessee, I think it just goes to say that I have successful people around me that help me be successful. So it just makes it so much easier for me.

SAMARA SPENCER: Yeah, I would say for me putting my name in the record books at University of Tennessee is honestly something special. A lot of people can't say they've done that.

For me to come in here for my first year here and last year playing collegiate basketball and doing that, I think it's a testimony to all the years I've been in college, but doing it at Tennessee is super special.

Q. Question about Ohio State. Not sure where you guys were while that game was unfolding, maybe coming to the building or maybe you had it on a monitor in your locker room or whatever, but thoughts about playing them? And as I look at the record here, Jewel, you would have, I think, played against them last year, is that correct?

JEWEL SPEAR: Correct.

Q. Maybe if you saw the game tonight and just your experience because it's a lot of the same people that you played against.

JEWEL SPEAR: I'd say they're a really good team that likes to press, just like us. So we kind of expect it to be up tempo. They have a lot of big time players that can make shots and can get to the rim and rebound as well.

We're going to have to box out and apply pressure.

THE MODERATOR: Jewel, Samara, thank you very much, and we'll see you tomorrow.

We'll open up the floor for questions for Coach.

Q. Kim, I'll pose the same question to you. What was that conversation like at the end of the first quarter, and what did you see change after that quarter?

KIM CALDWELL: Yeah, I think we did turn up our defensive pressure. I think we got in their legs. They were fresh, and I think they shot -- what did she shoot? Almost 60 percent in the first quarter.

So I think just pace, wearing them down over time, got in their legs. They started to shoot the ball a little short. We turned up our pressure, and it kind of took off from there.

Q. It felt like there was a lot of moments tonight where it felt like the team found their identity again, found their joy again. How would you describe the energy on the court, and how happy are you with the way they looked tonight?

KIM CALDWELL: I think it was some of the best energy we've had all year. Our energy has been really good all week. So let's see what it's like when we get punched. That's going to be important.

Q. What's a message that you would like to give to your girls going into the tournament?

KIM CALDWELL: I think the biggest thing we've tried to preach about -- and there's been a lot of different things -- is kind of leave with no regrets. We have eight seniors. We have a lot of people who, when we're done, we're done. To leave it all out there, have fun, enjoy the moments.

But don't let a 50-50 ball or an effort play or not having the resilience to make a mistake and then have the next play mentality, don't have to live with that for the rest of your life. Just have fun and play as hard as you possibly can in March.

Q. In your first season, you've put together a roster of 10 players who can all play at this level. Is that something you see long term for this program? Do you think you'll be able to put two full hockey shifts in for the rest of your time? Or is this just because of the way the roster came together, it made more sense to spread it out a little more?

KIM CALDWELL: No, we're hopeful this will continue.

Q. My question, obviously you won the Division II National Championship at Glenville State, so you've had NCAA wins to your credit, but tonight is your first Division I NCAA Tournament win. I assume you're going to say it's about your players, but for your coaching career that's kind of a neat thing to win your first NCAA Division I game. Just your overall thought about that and what it means for your players as well.

KIM CALDWELL: I think it definitely means a lot for our players, it means a lot for our program. I think the way we did it probably means more than anything. We hadn't been playing very well, and we hadn't really been having fun.

So to do it polar opposite of how we've been playing the last two weeks of the regular season was important.

Q. I know Cooper since the injury has been on and off as a starter. Can you just talk about the decision to have her in the starting lineup and how the injury has kind of impacted that.

KIM CALDWELL: She was phenomenal for us today coming off the bench. We don't really pay much attention to starters at all. I don't care. You're going in in a minute and a half anyway.

Just wanted to bring her off the bench and let her kind of get a feel for the game. She was efficient. She didn't turn the ball over. She was finding people. I think she had played very, very close to her ceiling today. It was great to see it.

Q. With the 3-point shooting tonight, it felt like the team was much more in rhythm than they have been the last few games. Was it the rest? What kind of led to that? Do you feel like they're solidly back in their rhythm?

KIM CALDWELL: Yeah, it was the rest. I've said it, we needed the rest, we needed the break, and then we kind of needed to manage our load a little bit better. We just looked a little sharper coming into this tournament, which I knew we needed. When we were going into the SEC, I knew we were just kind of gassed. So that break was really big for us.

Q. This is some of Edie and Tess' last moments on the court together. What is that thought process for you as I'm going to get them in, I'm going to get them to play together, what is that for you?

KIM CALDWELL: It didn't even cross my mind of getting them in together, but Edie has been such a big part of our program, and just giving her her moments. She's a fan favorite and a team favorite, so every time she gets it, everyone is screaming for her to shoot it.

She's just a positive light every single day in practice, and she's probably the most competitive player I've ever coached. She doesn't get a whole lot of minutes, but every day in practice she's trying to just cheat so she can win, and it's great. It makes everyone better.

Q. You touched on Talaysia a little bit, but plus 36-plus minutes, what does that say about the impact she had tonight?

KIM CALDWELL: It was big. She made everyone around her better. She guarded. She talked. She got rebounds. She was efficient. It's what we need from her going forward.

Q. How important was the performance Zee gave you tonight, especially with how important she'll be through the rest of March Madness?

KIM CALDWELL: Yeah, it was good as well. I knew, if we had an advantage today, it would be on the inside. She did a good job of finding her spots to the rim. She did a better job of playing next play. I think she missed her first two shots at the rim, and she didn't hang her head, she didn't pout. She just kept going forward, which is progress.

Q. Coach, you closed the gap on the rebounding. You out-rebounded them in the second half. I know it started out probably not in your liking. But Alyssa Latham, just her overall game, she ended up with four rebounds. It felt like more. She just seems like she is all over the court right now. How well is she doing right now with her stat line tonight too?

KIM CALDWELL: I think she played the hardest for us tonight. We give out awards, and she got that. She was up pressuring. She's our best out of area rebounder. She was going to get it, and you're right, if she wasn't actually coming away with a rebound on the stat sheet, she was getting a deflection or a hand on it. We're going to need that from her for every single game we play for the remainder of the year.

Q. One more quick question. Same thing about the 3-point record. The record was actually set against Oral Roberts with 12 made 3-pointers. That was the time when Candace Parker played. I know you're not surprised when your team makes 3s, but is it kind of cool to set a new record for made 3s in an NCAA

Tournament and your first one with your team here for Tennessee?

KIM CALDWELL: Yeah, it just feels good to see the ball go in again. It feels like such a long time since we've shot that well from 3 and we've been that efficient. I really think we needed that.

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