

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Norfolk State vs Maryland

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College Park, Maryland, USA

XFINITY Center

## Norfolk State Spartans

## Kierra Wheeler

## Diamond Johnson

Media Conference

**Q. Diamond, Mimi, for both of you, both of you come into this tournament with a lot of experience in terms of NCAA tournament appearances. What are some lessons you guys have learned from previous experiences being in this tournament that you are hoping to get a different result this time?**

KIERRA WHEELER: Really coming in just knowing that we have to be extremely disciplined. A lot of mistakes that we made previously were not allowed to make them in the game tomorrow. Just also knowing like what's at risk. We been here three times now. First time it was like kind of a shock. Now it's not a shock to us anymore.

Just us being determined and knowing what's at stake.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I say we can't start off slow. A lot of our games we start off slow, down by 20, 15, 10. Against a team like Maryland we cannot start off that far, especially going to be hard to come back. Like Mimi said, just discipline. Little mistakes we was making in previous games we can't make because they going to capitalize off of it every time.

Got to be disciplined and play our game. We got to come to the game confident and compete like we do every game.

**Q. Talk about your experience a little bit. Last year you went out west. This time a little closer. How excited are you about the potential to see more green and gold in the building tomorrow?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I mean, it's good. Like you said we're close our home. Got a lot of family up here. Our other teammates do as well. Sitting in this seat last year, like you said, we was this Cali. It was three hours ahead



and the time zone was a lot to deal with.

So we kind of fortunate enough to be close to home. Kind of have a good fan base tomorrow. Just the support that we need to make sure we feel like a home game. It feels good.

KIERRA WHEELER: Feels really good just to be close to Norfolk State. I think it's going to be a lot more green and gold than we saw previous years. I'm just excited. We had a fan bus come up here, so it's definitely going to be packed out with green and gold.

**Q. Diamond, started your career in the Big Ten. Very familiar with the Brenda Frese Maryland team. What are you telling your teammates about what to expect when it comes to playing Maryland?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I just said it's going to be more of a guard game. Maryland like to play fast. Their guards can go. It's kind of like a free system. That's kind of what has been. They have a lot the good guards and bigs as well.

As far as what they do, you know, they try to stay with they man. They can switch with the bigs because the big is active and stuff like that. It's going to be more of a guard game. Just know we got bigs like Big Mama, and Makoye and Ciara to hold down the paint as well and do what they do on the offense and defensive end.

**Q. For both of you, what was it like playing under the pressure in your conference tournament after you guys went in undefeated and I guess how much different does it feel being able to be the hunter again instead of the hunted?**

KIERRA WHEELER: It was really no pressure coming into the conference tournament. It was just because we had a lot of experience. Also like this group is very mature. Like I've been playing with Makoye for three years. Been playing with my Niya for three years, Da'naijah for three years. Me and Diamond have a great connection and only been two years with us. We spent a lot of time together.

So really no pressure. We been put in every situation



possible the last three years. It was just kind of second nature to us, no pressure.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, to piggyback off what she said, like you said, we was being hunted in the MEAC. Those teams, they didn't care about our record, who we was. They compete. They're gritty. I think that challenged us to start off dominant and not expect anything to be handed to us.

I also think our pre-season schedule was very tough. You know, we play Alabama, Missouri, Auburn, UNC. We playing teams in the tournament now. That kind of helped us going into the MEAC.

Then following up, like we here today, and like I said, we going to see these teams in the tournament. It's been a good season, pre-season, MEAC, I think our whole schedule just built to this moment honestly.

**Q. How excited are you all to show your brand of basketball? You got a lot of dawgs on the bench. Got to play tough. I think you have a lot of depth that people don't know about. How excited are you to show what you're all about and how you've played so tough all season?**

KIERRA WHEELER: I'm very excited. I think we got a lot of dawgs on our team that people don't know about, like you said. A lot of attention gets put on Diamond or me. If you worry about me too much you don't know AJ is coming at you or Bry. I think we have a lot of talent there. And we have a lot of maturity. Niya is a great shooter but people don't know that because she barley shoots the ball. You can't leave her open.

I'm excited to play on a national stage and just really give us a chance to show what we got. I feel like it's been hindered all year, but now is the time.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, like she said and you said, we got a lot people that can score any given night 15 plus. Been a lot of times where it wasn't just me or Mimi leading in to scoring or rebounding. Been a lot of other guards, like Da'Brya, Da'naijah, AJ, Makoye.

So that kind of shows the kind of team that we have that like she said, you just can't focus on one or two people. You got three or four others that can just come out any given night and do what they do.

Makoye was a big piece. She wasn't here last year with us, but this year she's here and been a big piece. Just bringing that energy and rebounding the ball and sprinting the floor and stuff like that. You can't leave her open

either.

Niya, like she said. It's a lot of pieces. That's just what we going to showcase in this tournament.

**Q. For both of you, I've seen Twitter -- well, X. You guys have been very active. The whole world has been active when they talk about the brand of HBCU basketball we've seen in the tournament thus far. For both you of you, how has it been seeing other HBCU teams in the SWAC show out and how does it feel that finally it's your turn?**

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I've been preaching about that since I've been at NSU. HBCU's we kind of like the underdog. Like you said, the SWAC, the MEAC, not a lot people know about a lot of HBCUs. It's good to see Southern pull out they win and they going dancing again. They had to do they play-in game, but it's good to see.

It's not just for us, it's for literally every HBCU in the world and even just mid-majors at that that don't get the recognition that I feel like they should.

But it's good to see the game of basketball just growing as a whole, not just P4 or mid-major schools. HBCUs are on the come -up. I been excited to see that the past two years.

When I was a P4 I ain't gonna lie, I didn't know much about HBCUs either. This opened my eyes to a whole different avenue, so it's definitely good to see.

KIERRA WHEELER: I definitely would like to say congratulations to Southern on being one of the four HBCU teams that got a March Madness win. Big congrats to them. Also Alabama State. It was just really exciting to see. Those were tough games for them too. San Diego Stated start to fight back, but Southern held it down.

It was very exciting to see like HBCUs prove that they deserve to be there. Hopefully next year they don't have to be in a play-in game. They can just be a 16 seed or whatever, because they deserve to be here just as anybody else. They won they conference.

**Q. I'm happy you guys mentioned the play-in. You guys came in, you're making history, the highest seed an HBCU team has had in the last decade. In what ways do you feel like the product shows the elevation of HBCU women's basketball over the last year?**

KIERRA WHEELER: We really just -- coming into the season we had end goals. This is one of our end goals, making it here. We're not done yet. I just feel like we're

prepared for this. Like it was June and a lot of schools wasn't in there but we was working. Me and Diamond was working.

We know what we represent. We represent a lot more than just women's basketball. Us being Black women, us being at an HBCU, us being the first really dominant program coming out in a long time.

We got Diamond coming from a P4. A lot of people don't do that. She's proving she can play and be dominant in any conference, doesn't matter. And I feel like we just knew what we was bringing to the table and we did a lot of work to get here.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, we was working hard. Ya'll was there when we was doing them hills and them steps and them double-doubles. Like it's a lot of work that was being put into it. And like she said, this was definitely one of our goals. Like towards the end of the season we was checking, so where we going to be, where we going to be. So it is kind of like good to see that like we got a 13 seed.

Three years ago started off 16 playing South Carolina; last year we was a 15 playing Stanford; so this year we're 13 playing Maryland. Each year just progressed, and that just happened with our team just working hard, coaches working hard doing scout, film, practicing and everything.

Wish ya'll could see a practice. We look like we love each other in practice. Literally just battles every single day. But it's definitely a good feeling once you know the hard work pays off. This was definitely one of our goals. Like she said we not done yet for sure.

**Q. Diamond, good to see you guys. Congratulations on everything. Been nice to be able to document it this year. Can you just talk about how has Coach Vickers really helped you all develop on and off the court this year and embrace the expectations that you all had?**

KIERRA WHEELER: One thing Coach V taught me is glass ceilings. Like once you reach a goal, once you reach the ceiling, you want to break through it. I've been very grateful that he came in with that mindset. That's kind of the mindset I want to take on for the rest of my life, not being satisfied and not getting comfortable.

Yes, we did break goals. They didn't think we was going to make it when they was the 16 seed and two years now we're the 13 seed.

Just very appreciative for his hard work and his motivation and that keeps me motivated. I love his of competition. He

always wants to compete, and I'm a competitor all around. Just being around that environment helped me grow a lot.

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say the same thing. A lot of times where he got me outside of my comfort zone, whether that's in life or whether that's on the court. Definitely appreciate him for that. He just gave me the range to do what I do on the court. You know, me just expressing whatever I went through at my P4 schools. He just kind of took that and he made me trust him with the process.

You know, trying to do something different. I thank him for that as well. Another big piece is that Coach Fox. She was in the gym with me, been in the gym with me for the past couple years. She just shows me what hard work looks like. They both do.

Whether that's film, practice, they always challenging me. Like he always say I don't jump on my pull up. I be lick I did jump. But then I look back at it like dang, I only took an inch off the ground.

He says little remarks which pushes me and makes me do better the next time.

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