

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

College Park, Maryland, USA

XFINITY Center

Norfolk State Spartans Coach Larry Vickers Diamond Johnson Kierra Wheeler

Media Conference

Maryland - 82, Norfolk State - 69

THE MODERATOR: We're joined now by Norfolk State head Coach Vickers along with players Diamond Johnson and Kierra Wheeler.

LARRY VICKERS: I knew that question was coming. I mean, there's not really a lot to say, honestly. We came into this game, felt like we were prepared. We were ready, focused. We were determined.

And, yeah, we made some mental mistakes. We really did. But this group won 30 games this year, 27 games last year, 26 games the year before, and we still walk into these things, (indiscernible) respect from the three people on the floor.

And I'm not going to complain about officiating. That's not what I'm going to do. But when y'all see these Spartan heads in your gym, I think we should get a little bit more respect than we get. That's unfortunate.

I have a new assistant. He comes from the Sun Belt. He loves talking to the refs. And I don't even get frustrated by it anymore, but it drives him insane.

And I'm not saying the officiating lost us that game. We fouled and we fouled and we fouled, and we fouled jump shooters, and we fouled jump shooters some more.

I think that was kind of two things. That was, number one, you know, they're so good, we haven't had a close game in a long time. Howard, they fought us a few good times.



But I think some of what you saw was us -- situations in practice really can't prepare you for a real game, the amount of people that were in the arena today -- I'm not sure what the number was. And we made some mental mistakes because of that.

I think if we would have probably had a lot more closer games late, I don't think we make some of those mistakes. Even me, it was a ton of stuff I would love to have back.

But, you know, one thing I love this group, honestly. Playing for me isn't the easiest. But they buy in and they work hard. You know, and, I mean, I appreciate them, and I appreciate what they've done for our women's basketball program. They both took a chance on me, they both took a chance on us. The rest of that locker room, Anjanae, Da'Brya, Makoye, Niya, Da'naijah. And my new ones too. They all took a chance.

And, you know, hopefully -- hopefully I was able to make them proud because they damn sure made me proud.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Diamond and Kierra.

Q. Diamond, can you kind of take me a little bit through the two halves, really hot start and what was working well then, and what kind of changed coming out of halftime, whether it was the way they were guarding you, or what was flowing for you guys in general?

DIAMOND JOHNSON: In the first half, I was being super aggressive. I think the second half I really wasn't. My teammates was going in the second half, and they kind of was doing their thing, getting stops, making shots. I could have been more aggressive. Yeah. Yeah, that's it.

Q. You guys were able to force a lot of turnovers and generate a lot of offense off that in the first half. What flipped in the second half, and how much harder was it without being able to force them into quite as much with your press?

KIERRA WHEELER: My team played with a lot of heart.



And we can be emotional sometimes, and that first half we played with a lot of heart, and I think our intensity kind of stopped a little bit because we got a little comfortable.

And I just try to tell them a lot of times, we can't get comfortable. It's never in a position to get comfortable. That third quarter, they did make some shots, some tough shots. But we knew that defense at the time, so I think that third quarter was a lack of intention.

Q. Getting two fouls in the first quarter, for each of you, I think that's the first time I've seen that all year. How did that impact you, your aggressiveness, or did it change your game or force you to do anything different knowing that you had two fouls in the first quarter?

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I mean, we play aggressive. The MEAC is an aggressive league, and we don't -- they let us battle it out. Like you said, it's not ideal for us to get two fouls early. So we kind of had to be smart and not be as aggressive on defense, which we usually are.

But yeah, that's really I got to say on that, sir.

KIERRA WHEELER: I'm a post player. You're supposed to be aggressive. So me getting that charge, me going for the rebound, I feel like that's a basketball play. Two quick fouls, you know, I tried not to take myself out of the game because my teammates still need me for 40 minutes regardless if I'm on the bench or if I'm on the floor.

Q. Kierra, this was a really tough battle down in the paint, their bigs were swarming and grabbing offensive rebounds. Talk about the battle that you had with them and what kind of things that they were doing that were making it tough for you.

KIERRA WHEELER: Just pushing me, trying to push me under the basket. You can't get a rebound if you're too far under the basket. So they did a good job pushing me under the basketball.

And just them all being -- I'm one of the tallest players on my team, but I'm not the tallest player out there. They're 6'1", 6'2", so they have a little bit of length.

So it was really just them trying to focus in on me because I'm a good rebounder, and that also caused opportunities for my teammates to get a lot of rebounds because they were so focused on me.

Q. Last year you played Stanford. Today you came out there, a lot closer game, a lot closer matchup. How would you describe the growth, you as players, and

this program has had in NCAA Tournament games from last year to this year?

DIAMOND JOHNSON: I think we just was mature over the years. I wasn't here when they -- three years ago, but last year kind of got a late start, then started to groove.

But, I mean, this team is amazing. Like it's unreal to win 30, 30-4, 30-5 now, go undefeated regular season.

I mean, we did a lot. And I know it's not the outcome. I think it was a fair matchup from Stanford. I think we had a chance to win. I mean, that's just not what happened tonight. But we did a lot, and we shouldn't be too upset. I mean, but yeah.

KIERRA WHEELER: I would like to give a big shout-out to Diamond because from last year to this year, even from when the first year I played with her, I feel like my transition has grown so much because of her.

I never seen nobody work as hard as her. She deserves a lot. She deserves a lot.

And I think the loss from Stanford, it motivated both of us. We was in the gym OD, like nobody know. And I really -- I'm really proud of her, and I appreciate her. Because that loss from Stanford, that built this 30 wins because we knew we could get up with them. Me and her are competitors. We want to compete with everybody.

When we took that loss, we took that personally. We take every loss personally. I really appreciate her, my team for taking that loss in and coming the next year and expecting more and wanting more.

So that was the difference between last year and this year was our work ethic, our motivation, was to do better, and we did better. We did a lot better.

Q. Kierra, I think everybody knows the work you put in, you just kind of mentioned it, working out with Diamond and getting those guard skills down, expanding your game to the three-point line. You showed that today. You played so well in the second half despite the outcome. How pleased are you that you got to show your game upon this stage and how you just put in so much work over the years, your third time in the NCAA Tournament?

KIERRA WHEELER: I'm very happy. My growth from the last three years, Coach LV says all the time, when I came in, he wasn't expecting this outcome at all. I came in the last minute. I think I came in August of my sophomore year, fresh off of JUCO. I didn't know too much about

Norfolk State.

He told me as long as I worked hard, I could play. And that's all I needed to know because I want to win and I want to work. And this program is all about working and winning. And I had a good first year here. It was -- I got Most Outstanding Player in the tournament, and from there I just built my confidence, and this program -- this program built my confidence a lot.

So being in the gym is just -- I just like to see the product of my work. And this was a good game.

Q. Just piggybacking off what Coach said earlier about the Spartans not always getting the respect they deserve, not the outcome you wanted, of course, but had stretches of time in the game when you guys had the lead and essentially made it competitive throughout. Talk about the competition in the MEAC and how it prepared you guys for this game, and describe how it feels for HBCUs to showcase their talent on the biggest stage like today?

DIAMOND JOHNSON: Kind of piggyback off what I said earlier, the MEAC is a tough league. They let us play, bang on each other. So when we come here, we're like, all right, we can be aggressive. But that's -- you know, probably not, but...

The Big Ten is a great league. Maryland is a great team. Brenda Frese, she's definitely probably going to be a Hall of Fame coach. And they were respected. And I think they respected us. I think they didn't come out and give us anything -- like going into halftime, we was up 30-32. I think, you know, they made some adjustments the second half.

And we just fought hard to the end regardless of what was going on. And I'm just, again, proud of this team, man. I decided to come here and play for Coach LV, Coach Fox, join Meme and join the rest of them. And they just welcomed me like I was family on day one.

And I can't thank them enough, honestly. They -- the road that I've been on is, like I said, probably the best decision coming to the HBCU lifestyle and coming into the MEAC.

KIERRA WHEELER: The MEAC, might not be too much respect as a conference as the Big Ten, but they came out every day. Them girls don't care that we was 14-0. Every time we played them, they came out with everything they got.

I think that prepared us a lot because even though the scores might not tell it, them games was hard. It was

tough. No buckets was easy at all. They came with the doubles, the game plan, and they executed. And we just had the better team, honestly.

The MEAC deserves a lot of respect. Howard, great team as well. NSU has built a great sisterhood for me. Like Diamond says, she came in two years ago. Two years in, this is how far we came just because we stuck together.

And I think that brings -- us being HBCU, we have to stick together. We don't get to separate at all or it's going to show on the court, it's going show in the media. So I think that us being together and us being a sisterhood brought us to where we are today.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to let Diamond and Kierra get going. Thanks for joining us, and you guys had a great season. Questions for Coach Vickers.

Q. Just kind of wanted to double back on your comments about what this season has meant to you guys and to win 30 games and to do all that, just how do you kind of reflect on what a remarkable run it's been here over the last four and a half months.

LARRY VICKERS: Well, I've seen a lot of coaches talk about the transfer portal. And after winning 27 games and as good as my players are, everybody who could return returned. Just not because they get a ton of money. It's not because we're flying first class or we have a private jet. It's because we're really a family. When we say Spartans on three, family on six, we mean it. And a lot of programs don't, but we do.

Q. I do believe they went 6-9 from behind the arc in that second half. Do they do -- from your perspective, did they do something differently to create better looks, or were those shots just falling, or would you have liked to kind of, I don't know, defend that a different way?

LARRY VICKERS: What came first, the free throws or the threes? Does anybody remember? It felt like the free throws came first and the free throws got them in rhythm for the threes.

We don't foul 25 times. I'm not saying we didn't foul, because it was a large moment, and we were probably fouling. I've got to watch the film. But you can't send teams to the free-throw line, especially as good of shooters and they were.

I think Sarah hit hers early. We had miscommunication in the zone. After that, we just started fouling. And even though we were scoring, we gave up 30 points. That's not

like us. And was the moment too big for us? I don't believe so. But I do feel like we're a little undisciplined. Something that we generally don't do.

But we really wanted this today. And I think us wanting it as much as we did is what kind of caused some of those fouls. I mean, we probably sent them to the free-throw line on threes four times. That's 12 easy ones. And you can't do that on this stage in somebody's home arena.

Q. Coach, a lot of people will look at your team and teams like Jackson State's women, and they'll say that you changed the narrative, not just around Norfolk State basketball, but HBCU basketball in general. Years past in the NCAA Tournament, teams have just been fighting to get themselves in the game. But your team comes out year in and year out, and you're playing to win. Just talk about what it means to you to change the narrative around HBCU basketball and some of the people and that helped you along the way to change that narrative.

Q. Well, some of you know my story. I was the associate head men's basketball coach. Our team was 0-19. Or AD, Marty Miller, fired our coach at the end of January and asked me to coach the rest of the season. We went from 0-19 to 3-7, and nine years later I'm sitting here, 30-4.

They both complemented our league, a ton. And 30-4 is no easy feat. I think we were one of the first teams in the country to get to 2. It's no easy feat. But we grinded day by day. We did it the right way.

I do want to say something about Diamond Johnson. And I don't compliment them a ton, I kind of compliment them with sarcasm, is my way to compliment them. But I will say this. She came to watch us play several times when she was still at NC State. She came to our games at North Carolina Central, A&T, and she said, He can coach.

And she played for a great Vivian Stringer her first year, and then she went to Wes at NC State, and we all know what he's doing now. And she said, That's the program I want to play for.

And I've watched her go from 7th in the first round when she got to me and drop and drop and drop and drop. And I don't know why. I don't know why. I do not know why. She was 7th in the first round when she got to me. And I actually called Coach Staley and I said, Do you think this would affect her? She said no. She said no.

We have ESPN+, I don't think anybody -- you know, so many games on ESPN+ at this point, of course you're

going to miss some. But our special ones, we need to tune in across the country. Need to tune in. Need to tune in. She needs to be on every mid-major finalist list, every Dawn Staley award winner finalist list, Nancy Lieberman finalist list.

She's super special. And she doesn't average 25. If you saw us play today, we looked to execute in half court, and we don't play super fast, and we want to have precision on both ends. And I don't feel like that was recognized enough.

Q. You mentioned 30 games, and also you're nine years being here. And that last third of your career, you probably had one of the best teams in HBCU and MEAC. So what's next for Coach Vickers?

LARRY VICKERS: Man, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I haven't talked to my team. We all have visions and goals and -- I don't know, man. I don't know. We'll see. We'll see.

Q. Coach, we kind of talked about this yesterday, location of the game and, of course, you played in Norfolk State, coached in men's, like you said? Been here a long time. How pleased were you with the turnout of the green and gold fans, and what's your message to them? They matched the energy to today even though this was technically a road game.

LARRY VICKERS: Our DMV Baltimore alumni chapters, they're so strong. They love us. They follow us. We played Howard for Senior Night, we might have more people in there than them. Norfolk State's basketball program is really strong. Our other programs, track, volleyball, I don't want to leave nobody out. Dr. J. And Dr. Webb really support athletics, and our fans really support us.

And they -- a lot of those people I saw were in Raleigh yesterday. So they drove. They watched our men play in Raleigh, and then they made it to Maryland to see their women play today.

And it just speaks to the program and what we built. And it's taken a little while, but I'm glad that it's in such a great place.

Q. What are you most proud of this season? With everything, get to this point again, as we talked throughout the years, honestly never easy. But what are some of those moments away from games and things like that that you're really going to remember this team?



LARRY VICKERS: Puerto Rico was a special trip for us. Some of the larger programs are able to go international every year, and we always talk about the Puerto Rico week and how bad we were. We were super bad in Puerto Rico. If you saw us in Puerto Rico, you know we weren't good.

It was a great experience for us. It was great that administration gave us the \$100,000 to go on that trip. It was a lot of memories made from the paddle boarding, just everything. We had an amazing time in Puerto Rico, even though we were 1-2. We had a great time. I'll say that. We had a great time in Puerto Rico.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us, Coach, and you guys had a great season.

LARRY VICKERS: Thank you.

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