

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - High Point vs Vanderbilt

Friday, March 20, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Mikayla Blakes

Sacha Washington

Media Conference



outside sources.

Q. You've been here before; how is the preparation different this time around?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Knowing what it felt like last year losing in the first round and not wanting to feel that again the rest of my career.

So just pushing my teammates to a high level and standard. When you come into March every team is really good so you have to approach that.

Q. How have you embraced your mentorship role with Aubrey this season? What are those conversations and moments like in locker room and in practices?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, just try to have her play with no pressure. I know being a freshman having to play a lot of the minutes is a lot of work and something you normally aren't ready for, but I just try to make it fun with her. I joke with her. I don't really care about her mistakes because she is such a good player.

Just continue to remind her she's the best freshmen in the country.

Q. With her coming in, her play style, it almost seems at times she's free styling out there. How is it building that rhythm and chemistry and timing with her on the court?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, it took us the whole summer. We got yelled at a lot of times. Especially our post players. If you're not looking at her you're going to get hit in the head with a ball, and it's happened a lot of time. Every time she has to ball she's looking to pass it.

So just knowing you're playing with a great point guard like that, she's looking to get you the ball, need to be playing attention to her at all times.

Q. In terms of High Point, what sticks out to you guys and how are you preparing for the Panthers?

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the stage Sacha Washington and Mikayla Blakes. We have 15 minutes for questions, and we'll take those now.

Q. Sacha, March has started. Seen some upsets on the men's side. What's the message from Shae as you guys prepare for the first game in this building in the NCAA tournament since 2012?

SACHA WASHINGTON: We are taking it one game at a time, so we are starting a new season. We plan to go 1-0 every game until there is no more left.

But, yeah, just taking it one game at a time, preparing for the next opponent like it's the most important. So, yeah.

Q. How rewarding is it for you both to be playing on your home court?

SACHA WASHINGTON: It's awesome. We love this court. It's just great to see that all of our hard work this season has paid off and allowed us to be back in Memorial a couple more times. I think it's very exciting.

Q. For Mikayla, in your freshmen season you won SEC Freshman of the Year; now this year SEC Player of the Year. How have you handled the pressure that comes with that and the national attention you're getting so early in your career?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I just don't pay attention to the media. I don't have notifications on when it comes to social media. Don't look at it. So I just play for me, my team mates, coaching staff, my family. I don't really look at



SACHA WASHINGTON: I mean, they're an NCAA tournament team, so at this point we know there is no more bad teams. All the teams in this tournament are great. Just making sure we focus on personnel, their tendencies, and what they like to do.

But, I mean, we're preparing the same way we've prepared in the past.

Nothing changes. We just are being better.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Now take questions for Vanderbilt head coach Shae Ralph.

Q. In the locker room everyone had LEGOs and puzzles and coloring. They also mentioned some TikToks. What did you guys all do when you're getting ready for high level games?

SHEA RALPH: So we are teaching them what it looks like to be a team that's going to compete for championships. So they don't get to have their phones in there. As they have people that come in to ask them questions and interview them, we want them to know how important that is.

And so the people that don't get asked questions are going to spend time together. We're not going to get this time back. This is the only time this team is going to be together, and I want to make sure we make the most of it.

The ones that do get asked questions, hopefully, and you tell me that if they didn't, they stood up, looked you in the eyes, weren't scrolling on their phones. Those are things they need to learn how to do. Obviously it will serve them well in the rest of their life.

Right now we're just focusing on being together and spending our time really wisely while we prepare. That's important. But while we're together we're going to have a great time doing that as well.

Q. I know this was a goal for you before the year started, being able to host. What is it like walking around here and seeing all the March Madness stuff up?

SHEA RALPH: It's so cool. I just spent 20 minutes walking around on the court making sure I knew where my box was. Same as it always is, but I get in trouble every game. It looks great. It looks amazing.

This was a vision that we had set, and shoutout to our esteemed Dobo over here, Chris Brand, for scheduling with our administration. We really worked last year to create a

schedule that we felt like was worthy of hosting as long as we took care of business.

So it's almost surreal to be sitting in the building looking at all the signs, going on the court and seeing that we're hosting the NCAA tournament in terms of just checking off the next box on our list of things as we continue to strive for championships.

Q. Can you just talk about Aubrey and how she's had such a phenomenal year this year. You lucked out with Mikayla's freshmen year. Now she's player of the year. Got another freshmen of the year in Aubrey.

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I mean, what Aubrey has meant to this team is really hard to put into words. When we go out and recruit, my staff, we do a really good job putting together a puzzle that fits each other well, that complements each other. We can't have pieces too similar or too big and don't fit.

Most of that is in alignment with our standards and values. Obviously there is a level of talent and skill you have to have. At this level you got to be able to do that pretty quickly. Anyone can go in the gym and watch her and see she can play. Most of the narrative was that she was too small to compete at our level.

What we saw from her, along with the intangible qualities -- chip only her shoulder, competitiveness, love for basketball she has -- was that she was going to be just fine.

So I would say that I think the outside looking in had probably like we lucked out, but those two have done exactly what they thought they were going to do and the future is really bright because they're both very young.

Q. With obviously all you've seen at UConn, how does hosting these rounds further elevate the program within this community?

SHEA RALPH: I think the opportunity to bring the community together, again, around our team as we're going into the NCAA tournament. These aren't regular season games. These are games we have to win. It's a one-game season that we have to win to move on in the tournament.

Hopefully if we take care of business at home, which what a blessing, right, to be at home for hopefully two games, one first that we have to take care of and then another. Then you're in the Sweet 16.

So to be able to host a tournament in Nashville as we garner momentum from the regular season we had, as we

get out into the community and build relationships, because it's one thing to want to come watch our basketball team play great basketball; it's another for them to feel like we're part of their family.

That's what we are here. So we're going to continue that so that month matter if it's November, December, February, March, hopefully late March next year again, the stands will be full of people and a huge home court advantage for us.

Q. The games have started. We've seen some upsets, particularly one on the team that you're playing, the men's program at High Point. How much does that maybe help you as you send the message one game, one game only when a team that shares that name and you say see what just happened?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, it helps a ton. I think we've talked about that a lot during the course of the year in terms of how we prepare. It looks no differently.

But I need them to understand -- and I think they do; they're paying attention -- that every team competing right now is a great team. The team that we're playing tomorrow is a championship team. They won their condition from tense championship. They won almost 30 games. They're really, really good. I don't care what it says on their chest, what conference.

We're done playing teams that aren't very good. No more of those left. If they didn't know, then after yesterday they definitely know it. We made sure to point it out today in film as well.

Q. You've talked about your vision for this team. We see things like with even the LEGOs in the locker room, things like that. How do you think this team compares to your vision and is it what you imagined?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, this team has been a joy to coach, and it's what I imagined and more. They have reminded me how much fun it can be to play basketball, to coach, to build relationships, to enjoy this part of your life.

It's hard work. So is everything else we do. What you guys do every day is hard work. We all have a story. We're all trying to accomplish things. We have jobs, families, friends, but we get to do this together.

They're high level basketball players and also high character, high level people. So one of my goals this year personally was to enjoy coaching more. They made it very, very easy for me and I absolutely love coming to practice every single day. Love walking in my office. I love

spending time with them and our staff.

It's an exemplary team in terms of what our vision looked like. I would say, again, like walking into the building and seeing this and getting to experience my team day in, day out, I could do this forever. They're a big reason why.

They laid the foundation for this program to do the things we're going to do both this year and in the future. I can't thank them enough and I don't want this season to end.

Q. Coach, spoke with Justine in the locker room. Speak? On her focus this week leading up to High Point tomorrow. For a player that at one point said she was thinking about putting the ball down for good, to be able to now come full circle to hosting here at Vanderbilt and how much she means to you.

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I mean, Justine bet on herself, but she came here to find her love again for basketball. But I also think just remind herself of who she was. I think our staff were really good at that.

We're good at building relationships. We're good at reminding people who they are. Again, it's going to be hard work. She's a great basketball player.

We were going to make sure we did everything to remind her of that, to pour into her in a way that she could see herself again, and herself has been amazing for us. She's playing like herself.

What I mean by that is Justine has an edge. You guys can probably see that on the court. She's very skilled, very talented, very smart. She's a great leader. She's come out of her shell this year in that role. An example would be this past week in practice I'll blow the whistle and be ready to yell at someone and she's already done it for me.

Then we'll go up and encourage them or come over to the side and I can see her encouraging. This is what I'm saying. This is what I need you to do. Instead of calling them out she's calling them up which is exactly what we did for her. I think it will serve her well the rest of your life. What's better than that? Seeing someone reach their full potential when at one point she was considering quitting.

That makes coaching worth it.

Q. As a college student myself I feel immense pressure. I can't imagine what these athletes are feeling especially in March. With players like Mikayla where the whole nation is watching you, how do you maintain that calm when there is so much pressure on them at the same time?



SHEA RALPH: We really try to focus on what we can control and I know that sounds really corny and people say that all the time. But these kids have been doing this for a long time and so have we. So there will be a lot of narrative. There will be a lot of eyes on you. There always is going to be and there have been for a long time. These kids been in the spotlight for a long time.

Luckily, I lived that as well. And so for me, we just try to keep our circle really tight, eliminate the outside noise. No disrespect because it could be positive or negative. That's great but we can't believe any of it.

We just have to focus on ourselves and making sure that every single day we prepare the right way. That we can control what we can control. Show up with positive energy and discipline and focus because all the other things, we have no control over it.

I love the eyes on us. I love the stories. But no matter -- and I tell them all the time -- you could have flowers growing out of every orifice of your body and someone is not going to like you. They're just not. They're going to think what they think about you. Who cares?

That's a great way -- I have a young daughter. I want her to learn that. People's opinions of you don't matter except for the people in your circle, people lifting you up every day, people in your family that are helping you achieve your goals.

So we keep the circle tight and focus and discipline, very straightforward and that's it. It's as simple as that.

Q. No matter what happens, this is Sacha's last run at Vanderbilt. She's been with you since the beginning. Can you tell us a little bit about that dynamic and relationship?

SHEA RALPH: We are going miss her, huh? Yeah. We're going miss her. We're not done yet. She is -- do you know how people just walk into a room and light it up? That's Sacha.

Any room, any time, any day, she'll walk in with a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. She'll have a joke. Give you a big hug. No matter if she's feeling great or not. I think as people that's a great way to be.

As you get older I think you realize how hard that can be. She just comes in like that every day. She comes in to practice happy. She is living her best life right now. Honestly, I mean, this year obviously we wouldn't be the same without her.

This program wouldn't be where it is without her. You don't see that very much anymore where kids commit somewhere to be there for five years, especially through what we've been through and what she's been through paragraph you see people jump ship all the time. That's okay. I'm not judging. Sacha's commitment is different. She's a different level kid.

I love watching her have success this year because there is no one more deserving and she's a great example of what I was saying earlier. I just want to keep coaching her as long as I can. She deserves it. We deserve it. We're just better because of her in every way.

Q. Coach, how was the preparation going into this tournament different than the last two years?

SHEA RALPH: No different. No different. Simply because I think when you have a level of standard that you want your program to exist at, doesn't matter who you play. Doesn't matter when you play. It has to look exactly the same every single day.

And so when we get to where we are right now, we're not like well now we have to ratchet it up. Now we have to prepare differently because this is different. We did the same thing in November as we did the November before as we did the November before.

That way now it's the same. Our process is the same. Our schedule is the same. Our focus and practice is the same. The things we are working on are the same. We don't have to be any different. We just have to be the best versus of ourselves.

That's where we live, here in this program. (Holding hand above head). So there is lots of other things that will happen. In terms of standard of how we prepare and play, we will live here all the time. No matter when we're playing or where we're playing.

Q. I cover Colorado, so a team you're not playing tomorrow; how much do you follow them? I know you know Shelly Sheetz a little bit. They've quietly built one of the more consist of the programs in the country. What's your perception of them if you've had one?

SHEA RALPH: You know, I have watched them a little bit. I do exactly what I tell my team to do so I'm focused literally on practice. But I do know Shelly Sheetz and I know she's a great person.

She's done a lot for our game and I think any team and

coaching staff that can build a program had this day and age and be consistently winning at the P4 level is doing something right.

Again, I don't know much beyond that, but if Shelly is there then they're good people.

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