

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

Vanderbilt Commodores

Shea Ralph

Mikayla Blakes

Sacha Washington

Media Conference

Vanderbilt 102, High Point 61

SHEA RALPH: First of all, thank you guys so much for being here. What an amazing environment. We really appreciate the fact that you guys are here covering these games. Next, I just want to congratulate high point on an amazing season. They played so hard. They are so well-coached. They were a tough opponent, and I believe, if I'm correct, this is their first time being a 15-seed. Is that right? Very well earned. Very deserved. It's amazing what they have done there. So just shout out to them because I really enjoyed playing them today. They did a great job.

And then to my team. It was a full team effort today. We talk about that, I feel like ad nauseam this year but that's why we've gotten to this point because our team is a true team we play with great chemistry, great energy. We had an amazing environment with our community, our family and friends today that gave us extra energy. But I really love the full team effort, especially after a couple weeks off. And I'm looking forward to what tomorrow holds but we're going to celebrate this one today.

Q. You've been here five seasons and you are a true leader for this team. I know you've spoken about it a lot all season but what does that mean for you, going on the path of March Madness and you're right there?

SACHA WASHINGTON: Yeah, it's just sighting that I get to be here and I've been here through the ups and downs. So I think just my testimony to what this program was and what it is now, I think is like really helping my teammates to see, I think that every day I just wake up and I want to be



better for my teammates, this program, like myself. So it's been really exciting to see that we're at the point that we are at now.

Q. How much were you motivated, considering you missed last year with the blood clot, how thankful are you to have one more shot?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I don't think words can honestly express that. These guys know that I'm so grateful to be back, so grateful to have another opportunity because really you never know when you're going to be done playing. The fact that I get to be here today. I've been healthy this whole season. So words can't even explain but I'm very grateful to be here and I'm very happy..

Q. You guys opened the game on a 16-2 run. What allowed you to start the way that you did tonight?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I felt like we came out and wanted to defend our home court and prove to everybody we deserved the seed we had and we're ready to compete. That wasn't our best showing and we're continuing to get better. That one game doesn't define us. We know who we are and as we continue to be us and start games properly, we'll be good.

Q. You broke Wendy's single-season career-scoring record to the paint what does that mean when you hear that?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I didn't know that. I'm just excited and really doing whatever my team needs me to be. Trying to get easy buckets and also I couldn't do it without my teammates, having four other people on the court who are threats in every other position. I'm just super thankful.

Q. You talk about what the record means to you and you had another 30-point performance tonight. One thing that you have talked about and Coach Ralph has talked about in great length is about how you came here to do things that had never been done before. How does it feel to see that all coming to fruition every single game for not only you but this team and how



just to see this program be displayed on a national level and changing the narrative of what it is?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I think when I decided to commit here, I just committed on faith and Coach Ralph, and the goals she had for this program and I knew what she was going to do here; and the teammates I had and the teammates coming, I know they are going to do it as well.

We have a lot of belief in our program. We very excited because we have a lot of support now and a lot of stands are being filled and we have a lot of alumni support. It adds fuel to the fire. We want to continue to be great and not let you guys down.

Q. How crucial is the rebounding effort and the second-chance opportunities?

SACHA WASHINGTON: This is another team we knew that we could have an advantage on. I always make it my personal goal every night. Nothing changes with that, they just made it easier for me not boxing out or whatever.

But like I made it my personal goal, I made it a goal for the team to have -- we need to rebound every night. That's how we're going to win games and that's how we are going to get second-chance opportunities on offense, especially in March. We knew we could do a lot of that tonight, and it was good.

Q. Can you speak to having Sacha back and what her rebounds means? She had 17 rebounds tonight, might be an NCAA-tournament single-game record for Vanderbilt.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Well, there you go, there was the record-setting performance, not just points wise but rebounding wise. I've always wanted to play with a really good post player and I knew when Sacha was coming back, I didn't get a chance to play with her last year but this year, we were really excited playing together this year. We're going to do what we need to do.

Her focus is rebounding. So I know if my shot is a miss, I know somebody is going to go hunt it and it's going to be Sacha. She's going to get the board or it's going to be a kick out. It continues to give fire to the team and we want to be great on rebounding.

Q. What was it like playing here on your home court in front of so many Vanderbilt fans, and how important was that for you guys playing on this national stage?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I think it's always fun playing

here at Memorial but tonight was special. The stands were full and that's always what I personally wanted to see over the years, and the fact that we got to see it tonight, it was amazing. Grateful that we played here tonight and grateful that we have one more opportunity to play here.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: It's just amazing to see that we built, the fan base to come back and support women's basketball here. We always show up to the men's game and the crowd is full, and we've always been like, we wish that was us. To be able to know we helped build that fan base and continue to build it and relationship-wise with them, I mean, it's amazing.

Q. I talked with a family before the game and they told me the reason that they keep coming back is because you guys had been so kind to their daughter over the years. Can you speak to what it's like to have so many little kids in the stands and what example you hope to set for them?

SACHA WASHINGTON: I remember being little once and looking up to people who, you know, I loved, sports people.

So, I mean, just coming in here, I just want to make somebody smile, and I love kids, completely honest. They are amazing. I hope one day they grow up and they get to achieve their dreams. If this is what they want to do, I hope they are able to achieve it and I hope that I can be a role model for them every single time I step out on the court.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I just think it just reminds us to be grateful. There's life outside of basketball. We can be so hard on ourselves but as soon as we step on court they want to give us hugs, give us high-fives.

And it's, like, we're human. Basketball isn't what defines us. We're just going to continue to build those relationships with them because it's always great to have a bigger role model and actually be able to talk to people you look up to.

Q. When you get into SEC play, you're on the floor for the majority of the game but what's it like seeing teammates that don't get a chance be out there?

SACHA WASHINGTON: It's awesome. They put in the same work that we do every single day, watching their hard work pay off, it's awesome. It's great that we get to see them come out and do their work.

Q. Being able to have 11 players score at least a point, most points in an NCAA Tournament game for this program, and then what Mikayla and Sacha did, an



all-around performance to start a tournament and good all around job?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, absolutely. I think for us, it was really important to start out on the right foot and we talked a hot over the last couple weeks about the season that we've had, and making sure that we celebrate that had because the season that we've had has put us in position to host the first and second rounds here. We are on our home court in Nashville in front of our family and friends, Commodore Nation, our community, and like Mikayla and Sacha said, this has been a dream. This has been a vision for us and actually being able to experience that today with our team and that dream with our team today was really cool. And understanding, they are bringing the energy, we have to put on a great show.

We have to come out here and honor that with how we play the game, how we play together, how we play for each other and how we show love to the community for coming out and supporting us.

I was really proud of our performance and there's lots of things we're going to clean up but that's the game of basketball. I thought today our energy, our teamwork, our communication, was really, really good from start to finish and that makes me excited about tomorrow and what's to come after that.

Q. How important do you think that this win and getting your big scorers to score is, and Sacha, really, to rebound, coming off that two-week break, and sort of the disappointing heart-breaker loss in the SEC Tournament to Ole Miss?

SHEA RALPH: I think that the way that we played probably holds the most importance to me. So there's been highs and lows all season. And I feel like I talk about this a lot, and it's important, though, to continue to remind them that nothing changes for us. We understand that it's a one-game season. We understand that we need to play our best or our season is over. That's understood.

But we really operated that way in terms of preparation and attention to detail, and the way that we kind of move within our process here, becoming great every single day.

So what I did love today was that it was a full team effort. I think that's probably the most important thing. Ndjaklenga gets a double-double. Our rebounding was great. We had four kids, five kids in double figures. That is the kind of basketball we're going to need to be able to play to make it really, really really deep in March.

We know Mikayla plays. We know Aubrey. We know what

those two can do, but they are going to need some help. And we can't have what's kind of bit us in the butt over the last month or two in terms of the games that we've lost and the starts that we had. If you take away one or two of our kids, and then we can't operate; that cannot be the case for us.

I think today, they took it personally. It's not who we are. We are a team, a really, really good team with great pieces. Everybody has value. Everybody has a role that they play that's really important for us to win big games and I thought we did that today, which is what I was most impressed about.

Q. You touched on there but what was the message you gave to your team after that loss in the SEC Tournament, and kind of how did you prepare them for this coming right out of that?

SHEA RALPH: Well, the first message was, sorry I got kicked out. That was the first one.

I think there were two things that were true in that game, which as a leader, as a coach, it was really important to point out to them, No, 1, we played very poorly for the majority of that game. Our energy was low and our practices hadn't been great leading up to that game. Our start was really pure and we know when we do that and we don't defend and rebound, we make it really tough for us to beat good teams. We know that. We know that before the game and it happened.

Then everything shifted in the fourth quarter. We saw who we actually are. I thought it was cool through the course of the game to see both of those things. We can compete with anybody in the cup try and a really, really good team, one of the best in the country if not the best in my eyes, when we play a certain way. When we don't, anyone can beat us.

So we have to have a sense of urgency and preparation and edge, we have to play a certain way, especially right now. I think that that game gave us that, especially leading into the NCAA Tournament.

Q. You began SEC Media Day at the beginning of the season talking about women who inspired you, your mom, Pat Summitt and now we learn that your players are inspiring young girls while they are young women. What does that feel like for you?

SHEA RALPH: I love the question and I appreciate you asking it to me. I think when I think about what that looks like for me, I think the best way I can describe it is that representation matters. It matters.

And so the role that I play as a leader that, you know, every day I show up and my job is to be a torch bearer and a trailblazer for my players because there were women, my mother, Pat Summitt, that did it for me. What they did personally impacted my life, and now it's my job to show our players what it looks like.

You can be a powerful woman as a leader. You can also be a wife and a mom if you want. You can be somebody who has transformational relationships with players.

And I get it. Sports is a business. I get it. The name of the game is to win. Our job is to win. But I've always thought, if I can help them understand what that looks like in terms of creating winning habits, showing them every day that the result is not what defines us, and Mikayla talked about that today. That doesn't define who you are. You can be all these other things and at some point, and right now, it's them, there's going to be young girls that look at and you wonder, can I do this? And they are showing them, yes you can, you can look like me. You can come to Vanderbilt. Take somebody like Sacha who wasn't super highly recruited and went through lots of things here and be playing on the biggest stage in college basketball and get a degree from Vanderbilt. You can do all those things if you put your mind to it.

So we have a platform here. I think it's really, really important to continue to pay it forward, and so that's part of what we do with our players. They are going to have relationships with those kids. They are going to be in our gym, playing with them.

That young girl, I know who that is. We see that family after every game. I know exactly who you're talking about. This is important because that's what they are going to remember when they grow up and they will remember when they want to quit and they won't because they have seen people do it before that looked like them.

Q. Can you talk about Sacha, she's the only carryover from your first team, your personal feelings about her and what she's been through, finishing up like this?

SHEA RALPH: That's a tough one. Like Sacha said, it's hard to put into words, especially in the landscape of college basketball. It changed a lot, even since Sacha has been here, and I think there's a lot of beauty to that, too. And the IL and the transfer portal for people to find the right place for them, I get that.

The theory behind that, I understand it. But I also really appreciate the kids, like Sacha, and I'll say Sacha in particular, who still decide to fight through adversity, who

pour into the process and honor the commitment and understand the value of delayed gratification. The grass isn't always greener on the other side, and that kid is really, really, really poured her heart and soul into this program, and we would not be where we are without here.

If you hear me say nothing else today, hear that. That kid has laid it on the line for us day-in and day-out. She comes into my office every day with the biggest smile on her face, hopping around, and then she goes to everybody else's office.

I don't know that we would be the same without that kid. I don't think we would. And she was the exact same way our first year when there wasn't a lot going our way. She was the exact same way.

And we as human beings know how hard that is to do. It was hard to show up the same way with that kind of joy. That kid is full of joy and light and brightness and love, and just her personality has transformed our program.

Q. Aubrey, her first tournament game, how proud are you of her and her performance tonight?

SHEA RALPH: She's a baller. Yeah, she is. She is. I mean, that's what they call her, "Aud the Baller." I think all of our team just bought tee shirts off her website. She is built for these moments. She's built for these moments and she's been that way since we started recruiting her.

There's always narrative around what kids have and what they don't have. Nobody has it all. Maybe Michael Jordan, maybe he's the only one, right. But you can see the intangible quality that is Aubrey has: The way that she has, the calmness that she brings to the court, the poise.

She just likes playing. She just wants to be out on the court. She makes everybody around her better. She doesn't get her feathers ruffled much. She's still learning how to play at this level but she's pretty damn good already. And for this to be her first NCAA Tournament game I think says a lot about what her future holds and also the future of our program.

Q. Mikayla, you start running out of words to describe what she's doing but a single-season scoring record, she past the thousand-point mark back in December but to do that in the first game, and oh, yeah, by the way it's a game where you all score the most points in a tournament game, the 30th time that Vanderbilt has been in the tournament. What else can you say at this point?

SHEA RALPH: That's what you guys are good at, right?

That's what you -- yeah. I think as her coach, I will continue -- and somebody that truly loves the kid. I mean, I'm her basketball coach but I'm more than that, too. She said it. We have faith in each other. When she decided to come here, we had faith and belief in each other.

And Mikayla came here to do the uncommon thing. You look at some of her quotes, the uncommon thing and build a legacy. I would say she is pretty uncommon in terms of how she's built, and obviously she has a skillset.

She works really, really hard to do the things that she does to make them look very easy, and we are witnessing a generational player, and I don't throw that around. That kid is different. She's bit differently, internally, externally, she's the nicest kid on the planet and will come out of the court and absolutely rip your heart out of your chest in a bunch of different ways, and you'll still want to give her a hug after the game.

She's an incredible student, incredible teammate, incredible leader. And she's only a sophomore. So humble, so poised. I don't have to worry one second about the kid except sometimes have her take a little bit of a deep breath and continue to play with joy because she's so hard on herself.

But we are witnessing greatness, and in a way that's very uncommon, because I think, again, I'll say this: I think it would have been very easy for her to make a different choice. But she didn't.

And look at what she's done for our program and for young girls that are looking up to her, for Vanderbilt, for Nashville, for women's basketball. Look at what she's done because she decided to bet on herself and she put the work behind it. I'm just blessed to be her coach.

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