

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Illinois vs Vanderbilt

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

Vanderbilt Commodores

Coach Shea Ralph

Mikayla Blakes

Justine Pissot

Media Conference



I'm doing here at Vanderbilt and I hope they do one day.

Q. You mentioned your brother being here and your whole family was here last night, along with your high school coach. You mentioned it is her first time getting to see you play in Nashville. How does that make you feel knowing they're all in the stands watching you?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: It's the reason I keep going. Basketball can be hard. They're just a breath of fresh air and have supported me along the way. They have a pact that at least one of my parents will be at every one my games, and they've stayed true to that.

I couldn't be more grateful that my brother is able to watch me play. He hasn't been able to watch me play a lot, and this was his first year actually being able to watch me play in college and in person probably since high school.

It means the world to me. They're able to stay at my apartment so it's a lot of the chaos but it's just fun. Smile mile.

Q. For both of you, when you look at Illinois, this is a young team. The youngest team in the tournament. Although you've got somebody who is young Aubrey yourself. When you see somebody that's a young team, is that an advantage or what you see on them on tape, how tough are they coming out of the Big10?

JUSTINE PISSOT: Yeah, I think Illinois is a great team. From watching them yesterday and in film they're great competitors. I think tomorrow is going to be a good game. We have two competitive teams going at each other.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, I agree with what Jus just said. We don't take anybody lightly. Everybody is good and trying to win. We're going to take it like we do every other team.

Q. For either one of you, tomorrow will be your official last game in Memorial of the season. You guys haven't lost a game here all year. That's a big improvement from even last year, the year before, especially Justine

Q. For both, been working to get the program to this point. Tomorrow night you take the court with a chance at a Sweet 16, something this program has not done since '09. How big is this opportunity, before you all right now?

JUSTINE PISSOT: Yeah, I think for me, it's pretty special. That's what I came to Vanderbilt for, was to get to a Sweet 16 and hopefully further than that, but I'm also thankful that I get to be in this position with Mikayla by my side for my last season as well.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, as Justine said, I feel like it's a grateful experience. To be able to do it in Memorial and be able to do it in front of our fans, we're just super excited.

Q. Mikayla, you spoke a little bit on this yesterday. On the sidelines we saw a few young fans holding signs with your name on it. What does that mean to you and did you have any mentors you looked up to when you were a kid as well?

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I would say growing up I kind of got into basketball a little late. But really my mentor was my brother, my father and people like that. And I think like I said before, like it's just special. Like to just reminds me like there is life outside of basketball. Whether I have a good game, bad game, there are people supporting me.

That's just my job. I feel like it makes basketball fun to know that people are out there supporting me and I'm a role model for other people. I also want to take the time to talk to those kids, because I mean, I don't want to be snobbish. They look up to me and want to do the things



you've been here now three years. What does it mean to see just the growth this program has had and what does it mean to you to play tomorrow in the round of 32 to potentially go undefeated at home for the season?

JUSTINE PISSOT: I don't think we're really focused ongoing undefeated at home, even though that's kind of a great experience and feeling.

But like I said before, that's what we came to Vanderbilt for is just to improve every single year. I feel like my three years here we have taken a step forward in the right direction.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I guess I'll add I feel like the crowd this year has definitely helped us become undefeated at home. They give us a lot of energy and we just try it reciprocate the energy as well and want them to keep coming out.

Q. Shea, you're obviously no stranger to March Madness. It's got a different schedule where you play on one day, have rest, and if you advance you have a few days off after that. Especially with Mikayla and Aubrey playing as many minutes as they do, is there anything differently you're doing to prepare for that kind of rest schedule?

SHEA RALPH: No. I think we did a pretty good job this season of scheduling some games exactly like this; some weren't. But also in the gauntlet of the SEC, the way we play, the high minutes they play, we have a pretty great schedule in terms of their recovery and how hard we practice.

I'm more of an intuitive coach, but I also know it's 2026 and so we use data and analytics and load and all these things to make sure that all the science we have with all the art of being a basketball coach and knowing what your players need, we kind of marry those and make sure they're ready to go.

What I know as a basketball player is that in March you're just ready to go. You're just ready to go. You play, you show up. However many hours of sleep you get or don't get or minutes you play or don't play, whatever that looks like, morning, night, afternoon, you just have to show up and be ready.

I trust that those two will always be able to do that.

Q. I just spoke with Sacha on this topic. How have you seen fan attendance change throughout your time here.

SHEA RALPH: Yes, we are so excited about the way that our community is showing up for us, and those of you that have covered us for a long time and have been in a lot of those press conferences know I basically beg people to come and show up.

I know it's important that we provide a product that they want to come support, that when they come watch us they have a great experience, they enjoy themselves, their family have fun while they're watching the game, and before the game and at halftime they feel like they have relationships with our team, that they have role models with our team.

So we really put a lot of work into that. At the end of the day they also want to support a winning program and team, so as we built those relationships and had the community come out and worked on that over the course of the past five years, I feel like it's paid off in spades for us this year.

They truly are part of what we're doing. It matters that they show up because they make a difference for us. I'm hopeful they will again tomorrow as we try to go to the Sweet 16.

Q. You've talked about your mother as an inspiration to you. What is a lesson she taught you that you can implement into this team especially going into March?

SHEA RALPH: Man, she's going watch this so I'm feeling pressure. She's taught me so many lessons. I think -- well, there is a couple. I think the first is my mom has the opportunity now to travel with us and be part of what we're doing, and reminds me all the time that like how cool it is that we get to experience all of these things in terms of travel and fan attendance and the way that this is laid out.

The resources poured into women's basketball and women in general, it did not happen when she played, and that's just a fact. But it was part of laying the foundation for it being able to happen now. As our players get to enjoy that, we remind them. And it's not like -- I'm not trying to nag them but you have to understand you're part of this.

The foundation has been built for and you now you're going to continue to build it for the players that come after you by appreciating what you have, by celebrating the successes, pouring into each other just like the women before us did, like my mom.

The other thing that she taught me is we're not quitters. The things that we have internally, the way she raised me, are intangible qualities that no matter what comes my way I know I can battle. I'm really lucky that I had a mom like



that, because had it not been for those things I don't know that I would be here.

So now I get to try to instill those same qualities not only in my team but in my own daughter. When it's time for them to show up to are powerful women or whatever arena, in sports, business, family, they'll be ready and willing and prepared to do so.

Q. When you have the nation's leading scorer you can't exactly hide that person when a team is preparing to face you. Shauna Green said this morning she dropped a name to try to help her team get prepared: Caitlin Clark.

SHEA RALPH: Yeah.

Q. How do you see teams defending Mikayla? How many different ways are they trying to limit how many shots she takes, the way she can launch shots from almost anywhere on the court?

SHEA RALPH: I think at this point in Mikayla's career I don't think there is anything we haven't seen. People try, and we don't talk about that that much. We keep throwing it out there, and that has been since she's gotten here. We know they're going to try to shut her down.

What's beautiful about having Mikayla on our team is she's great team player. We have lots of really great players around her that are willing to step up in those moments. They understand their role. They know who Mikayla and Aubrey are. When the opportunity presents itself, depending on how people try to guard them or focus on them, then our team is ready to step up.

So I think it's an amazing comparison. Obviously Caitlin Clark is one of the best players to ever play college women's basketball and women's basketball in general. I think we're different. I think Mikayla is different. And not bad or good, just different.

And so it's exciting to know that we prepared for those moments, and I understand and Mikayla does, too, that she's really hard to guard. I don't know that you can guard her. But I do know that if you try, then our team is going to make you pay.

Q. Coach, yesterday what did your coaching staff see out of Illinois in the game they played after you guys? What specifically were you preparing your team for today about them?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, Illinois is really, really good team. Obviously they're here for a reason. They have beaten a

lot of great teams being top 10 teams being top 25 teams this year. They're a really well balanced and extremely well-coached. Very physical. They have size.

They can shoot the ball. Their big kids can shoot the ball. I think we saw that yesterday. We know the teams that are playing right now are great teams. That's what we want to be as well. So we just try to really focus on ourselves.

I like that they were able to witness that, but, again, kind of to piggyback on Teresa's question, we just really try to prepare ourselves.

Like from top to bottom, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow we know that we're probably -- we've probably seen it before and we have to be prepared to make adjustments when and if needed.

Q. You all added practice players this year and a practice squad. How do you come to the decision to add that? What was the process like of getting practice players and how have they made an impact on your team?

SHEA RALPH: We have really worked hard the last few years to get great practice players. That's a different level of commitment, right? They're going to school at Vanderbilt. We're not paying for them to go to school. We're not paying for anything. They just show up because they love to play basketball and they want to help our team.

I think what we do give them is an opportunity to be part of our family. We treat them just the same way as we treat our players. And they've made a huge impact for us.

So I've been on my staff's butt for the last three years literally, we need better practice players. We need higher level of talent, greater level of commitment. Because it is going to make a difference.

I know that because I've seen it.

It also gives us a chance to keep our kids all together and continue to work on different things with lineups and that sort of thing. We have such a great group this year, to the point where I can't remember what conference game it was, but it was deep into our conference.

We were not feeling like they were prepared to go out and be a certain team so they wanted to come in and watch film with us. They're walking through the things out on the court. Watching film with our staff.

They like take it very seriously. They're talking to our

players in the huddle like we're preparing you to win Championships. I mean, it's awesome. They are so committed. You can't say enough about it. They don't get any shine. They literally don't get much at all, but an opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves and I think that's really cool.

Q. Coach, last night your bench scored 29 points. How important going forward is having those pieces coming off the bench in the tournament?

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, I'm going to keep it circling back to Teresa's question. We get that a lot when we talk about how are we going to stop Mikayla Blakes. It's an honor to answer that question. It's an honor to coach her. Honor for her to be prepared to great players in our game.

But if we don't have those kinds of contributions from our team whether points or rebounds or screens or communication or defensive stops, then it's going to be hard for us to win championships.

We'll win a lot of games. Mikayla and the rest of the kids on this team came here to win championships. You need more than one player to be able to do that. Our team understands that. They also understand they all bring value and add value. They know their role.

They know they're going to do something really important every single game to help us win. It may not be what Mikayla does. Not many people can do that. It's going to be something we need to win the game.

Q. One of the most admirable qualities about your team is their ability to be role models. You can't say that about every team out there. How does your program instill those qualities off the court?

SHEA RALPH: It's a nonnegotiable. We don't have -- I appreciate you saying that. That means a lot to hear. But we talk a lot, especially with our staff in the way we've laid out our vision here. I'm not a big person in terms of rules. I think rules are for my seven year old daughter who doesn't quite yet know or want to know the difference between right and wrong.

We have standards. We operate a certain way. We live a certain way, standards and values. And my No. 1 standard is you're going to be a good person.

You're going to come here and be a great person. You're going to invest in the people that are investing in you. There will be highs and lows. We're going to win a lot. We're going to play basketball. That's what you came here to do.

You're going to get a degree. But you're also going pour into the people pouring into you and use your platform for good.

These are young women like I had, like you guys probably had, that are representing what's possible. Our players are representing what is possible. If I didn't have that when I was growing up I would not be sitting here in front of you. I would not have done half the things I had the opportunity to do.

And so it's part of our responsibility. But it's also a great reminder for our players that win or lose it's just bigger than you. It's not about you. Those kids love them no matter what. They show up. They cheer for them. They have for years. So that's a really cool thing, too.

One of the blessings that young kids can give you is just a reminder that it's always bigger than wins, losses, success, failure. You're showing them what it looks like to handle both of those.

Q. There is so much talk about Illinois' team being so young but Mikayla is a sophomore. What do you think her age -- what separates her as a sophomore that makes her so special and different from other players?

SHEA RALPH: Yes, Mikayla is a sophomore and Aubrey is a freshmen, right? So what separated Mikayla always from the beginning of the time that I've known her is her level of maturity.

Her ability to stay poised and composed and confident I think -- well, I know, that that is a huge testament to the way that she's been raised. The people that have poured into her to the point she's gotten here. You can't really get under her skin.

She's not defined by the points that she scores or the games we win. She is defined by something much greater. You know, at her able, that's pretty unique to find; especially on the stage she's on.

I've always believed and I think people say this and I'm not joking, but I think age is just a number. It really is. Like there is a lot of qualities that you can have as a human being, whether you're young or old that can set you apart.

Mikayla has wisdom, maturity, poise, true confidence, true competitiveness, all the great things you need not only to be an elite athlete, but an elite human.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports