

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Texas A&M vs Nebraska

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Corvallis, Oregon, USA

Gill Coliseum

Texas A&M Aggies
Coach Joni Taylor
Aicha Coulibaly
Janiah Barker

Media Conference

Q. Aicha, what was your reaction when you saw Texas A&M's name pop up on the bracket screen?

AICHA COULIBALY: I was super excited because this is the first time I've ever been to the NCAA Tournament. I'm a senior, and it was a lot of excitement. I just didn't know what to say. I was shocked. It feels great.

Q. Aicha, what's it like when you're watching that show when you're on the bubble? What's the emotions of watching that entire show?

AICHA COULIBALY: Like I said, our name popped up and they called our name really fast. I was just sitting in my chair, I was just screaming all over the place and jumping. I was just full of emotions. It's just exciting to see how far we came this season. We had some lows and some ups and downs, and we just kept fighting, and this is where we are at right now, and it feels great.

Q. You obviously had one of the better reactions of the selection show Sunday. How do you move forward from that and get ready to play a game against a team like Nebraska?

JANIAH BARKER: I think it's just -- first, of course, it's a blessing to be here, and I think it was really, really cool and fun just to be a part of that, and it was all very, very genuine. We came in the next day or two days later. I think we had an off day, we came in and was ready to work. Joni -- after the selection show, we seen the coaches for a little bit and then they left. They wanted to go scout it. They came to us and told us we have a really good chance to do this and they believe in us, and I think



we're all excited to be here, and honestly all respect to Nebraska, all respect to everybody here, but we're ready to do what we need to do, which is win.

Q. Playing South Carolina, coaches, fans, people will say playing a team like that will make you better. Do you believe any of that, or is that just what people say after you have a game like that?

AICHA COULIBALY: I feel like that's what people will say, and I know what our team is capable of and what I am capable of. It wasn't new, and I feel like we just stayed composed and played our game, and that's what we've got to keep doing going into the game tomorrow, as well, against Nebraska.

Q. Endyia Rogers played a couple years just down the road here at Oregon. When you guys knew you were coming here, what was her reaction and what she has told you about playing in this part of the country?

JANIAH BARKER: Honestly if you seen the video that we posted on Texas A&M, she was on the side over here doing one of these. She was really, really excited.

We landed in Eugene, actually, and we drove over to here. She's just excited herself. She's back in Pac-12 country, and I think she's excited to play and get back to her regular self because she's back on the court.

I'm excited to see her to be back here, and hopefully she can do what she did when she was at Oregon for us.

Q. What challenges does Nebraska present to y'all, and what will it take to play a great game tomorrow?

AICHA COULIBALY: I think it's going to take a lot of mental focus for us. They have a lot of shooters and we have to be ready to contest every shot.

Just stick to our own defensive principles and do what we're told to do and follow the game plan and scouting and stuff, doing our job. It's going to take everybody, not only one person can win this game. Just getting stops and like offensively executing on offense and just staying focused



the whole game. It's going to be a mental game for sure, so we've just got to stay locked in and play our game and not get distracted.

Q. What's the biggest change for you as a player from last season to this season?

JANIAH BARKER: I would think for me as a player, my role. I think last year I was a more freer person just because I was a freshman and just trying to figure out what was really going on. I think this year I have more on my plate as the coaches give me, which is a blessing, as well. But just to be a better leader, just to be a better example of what a good teammate should be, a good player should be, a good listener.

It's just a lot of stuff that they told me about me mentally, just learning from those types of things. But I've grown a lot, and I'm really happy for my coaching staff to give me those types of things to get better at and go forward. Yeah, I've grown just being a better Janiah.

JONI TAYLOR: I'm excited to be here in Corvallis, obviously, in the tournament. Excited for our team. This was one of our goals for this year, and ready to get out and practice and just get going so we can face a really tough Nebraska team tomorrow. We're going to have our hands full. They shoot it, they have great post presence, really, really good team and have a great body of work, and just excited to get out there and perform tomorrow.

Q. Endyia Rogers played nearby at Oregon for a couple years. What's been her reaction to being selected to play here in Corvallis?

JONI TAYLOR: Well, I think, number one, Endyia is really grateful to be back playing. She understands the impact she has on our team, and she worked extremely hard to get herself back on the court. Excited for her to be able to play, and then to make the tournament and then find out we're coming to Corvallis, I think she's got a ton of fans who are coming to support her. It's a gym she's familiar in, and just excited for her to go out and play again.

Q. What's unique or a challenge about playing Nebraska, that matchup?

JONI TAYLOR: Well, I mean, they put five scorers on the floor. You look at their starters and four out of five make the all-tournament team in some way, whether it's Freshman of the Year, First Team, all-freshman team. Extremely talented. They play with great pace, and then they can also slow you down, pound it inside. They just have weapons all over the floor, and it makes it hard to double because they can hit you from three. Jessie does a

really good job of scoring off the bounce. She's a three-level scorer. They just stretch you defensively.

Then offensively they make it really hard, as well. They, in my opinion, from the film that I've watched, they're as good defensively as they are offensively, and I don't think they get enough credit for how good they are defensively.

Q. Y'all had one of the better reactions on Sunday for the selection show. How do you move forward emotionally to get ready for the biggest game of the season?

JONI TAYLOR: Right. Well, I was really excited about their reaction because I have been in that room a ton of times where when you know you're going, it's like, okay, we're in, what's next. So to capture how they felt, how we all felt, was a really, really special thing, and we wanted them to have that moment. That's what Sunday was for. We also had Monday off. So when we got to work on Tuesday, we were locked in and ready to go, which is something this team has done all year long.

We try really hard to be neutral and not ride the wave of being too high or being too low. We've had some really high moments this year, and we've had some really low moments this year, and we've remained really neutral throughout it all, so I think this was par for the course in terms of how we responded.

Q. Obviously last year you won nine times and now 19. How does it feel to feel validated and being in March Madness in year two?

JONI TAYLOR: Well, I think for us, it's our own internal validation of we're taking the right steps. This is where we wanted to be in year two to get Texas A&M women's basketball back into the tournament. It was one of our key goals for the year, and we did that.

I think as a staff, as a program, all it does for us is confirm that we're moving in the right direction. Are we where we want to be? Absolutely not. But are we moving in the right direction? Sure.

In terms of outside validation, we really try hard to not worry about what other people think, say or feel because if they're not in our program every day, they have no bearing on what goes on.

Q. Endyia Rogers had her injury late in the season. How is your team different when she is healthy?

JONI TAYLOR: You know, I'm going to quote Buzz Williams here. He texted me after the Mississippi State

game in the SEC tournament obviously saying congratulations, happy birthday, all the things, but I had been saying it but not in the way he said it, and what he said to me was with Endyia back on the floor, it looks like everybody can sit back in their normal seat at the table. I think that's what she does for us. There's a calm. There's a, okay, let me put down this extra load that I was carrying and just pick up my normal bag that I wear, and you can see that when she's on the floor. Coming off the bench or starting, just knowing that she's available gives everybody a sense of calm, and it allows us to take our normal seats at the table.

Q. There was a photo taken of both the men's program and the women's program before both teams left on Wednesday praying in a circle. What does that mean to you being synchronized with your men's program?

JONI TAYLOR: I have been fortunate to be at a lot of institutions where there's been incredible men coaches for leaders and incredible staff and young men as players. I have never been a part of something as special as we're a part of now with our men's program at Texas A&M, and that comes from the top down. That starts with Buzz. His young men are who they are because of him and how he leads them and directs them.

There is cohesion. There's chemistry there. There's friendship. Our director of athletics culture came to me the day before and said, hey, both teams are practicing, can we pray before we practice and leave. Absolutely.

So to have that moment, it wasn't something that I thought of. It was Ashley McCord and Antonio McKenzie; they came together and came up with that idea. But to be able to do that and have both teams present and just be in that moment to thank God for where we've come and where we are and what we're going to do and how we're going to represent not only Texas A&M but hopefully bring in glory in everything we do, it's really, really special, and you don't see it a lot.

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