

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Georgia Tech vs Richmond

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

## Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets Nell Fortner Kayla Blackshear Tonie Morgan

Media Conference

**Q. For both of you, losing five of six down the stretch can be tough on a team sometimes, but considering the way it happened, four of those teams were NCAA teams and you finished by taking a No. 2 seed down to the wire. Is it possible you could build momentum from what you've learned in the last couple of weeks?**

**KAYLA BLACKSHEAR:** For sure it's possible to build momentum just because the way we lost those games was -- just like, it was down to the wire each game. It wasn't any blowout, like oh, just go back and reconstruct, rebuild. No, it was just us learning from each mistake and just trying to be better.

**TONIE MORGAN:** Yeah, we definitely took a lot of things from that experience. I wouldn't say it was something we needed, but we definitely gained something from it.

**Q. Kayla, it's your third year in the program. What does it mean for what you've accomplished as a team from the three years that you've been here, from not making a postseason to the WBIT to being a No. 9 seed in the NCAA Tournament and getting a trip to Los Angeles? What's it been like to be along for that ride?**

**KAYLA BLACKSHEAR:** It shows that it's progression every year, and it's been a joy to be around this program, even when it wasn't so great the first year not making postseason, and then last year going to the WBIT. We're learning and we're growing. And then, now to ultimately get the best ending, I guess, in the NCAA Tournament, it's really nice.

**Q. Tonie, you're coming off a big double-double in that**



last game with five assists, big productive game. For the team as a whole, what does it look like when Georgia Tech is really effective? When you guys were scoring in the 80s and even in the 90s earlier this year, what are you guys doing right? What's going on that you can hope to replicate in this tournament?

**TONIE MORGAN:** Definitely pushing pace, making stops on the defensive end. We know we're a faster paced team. We like to get out and run. But just running our lanes, knowing what we're supposed to do, and just executing to a tee is what we plan to do.

**Q. Kayla, speaking to that NCAA Tournament experience, what's it been like being here in LA and getting used to practicing and you go around and you see the March Madness logos everywhere, what's that like for you?**

**KAYLA BLACKSHEAR:** It's definitely an experience that I'm glad I had my freshman year, like just seeing everything, or else I probably would have been a little shell shocked. But having that experience, not while on the court, but being able to be around it, be around the media, be around all the signs, just being -- we were at Stanford at the time, and it was just very nice to have that experience going into this.

Then, now getting to play in it is -- it's more like a dream come true. Full-circle moment for me.

**Q. Tonie, speaking to some of those close losses, there are some teams that would have those close losses, and then it just spirals out of control, it goes away from them. How would you describe the leadership of this team to keep it together even when maybe the results aren't going the right way, but you can still find positives through some of those close losses?**

**TONIE MORGAN:** I mean, yeah. The leadership core has been here for three years. We've been through not so many successful seasons. So just knowing that we don't want to go back down that specific path, we know what to do and what we want out of this team because we can



make it happen this year.

**Q. Something in this city, specifically around women's basketball, has been really popular both with USC and UCLA being really successful. From your vantage point with your program in Atlanta, how would you describe maybe the momentum around women's basketball and the attention that this tournament is getting and that you've seen growing in the last few years?**

TONIE MORGAN: I would definitely say we've seen it firsthand from my freshman year to now. You can see the stands, be and it's like -- it's definitely something different. We have a lot more people in the crowd, a lot more people want to get autographs from us. It's kind of like a dream come true, like she said, because people are actually watching our game now, so it's cool.

**Q. How much do either of you know about what you're going to be facing tomorrow? Have you watched Richmond? They have the Atlantic 10 Player of the Year, some other really good players. What are you expecting?**

KAYLA BLACKSHEAR: We have a really good scout. Our coaches, like right after Selection Sunday, they went straight to work trying to make sure we knew everything that we can about Richmond, being that we're not in our conference and probably haven't seen them all year. Just making sure that we do our work because they are a really, really good team. Though we haven't seen them, they've been playing, and they've been playing well.

**Q. Did you get a chance to do anything fun yet this week?**

TONIE MORGAN: Yeah, actually. We went to the Santa Monica pier. It was really nice, and we got to see the sunset, so it was definitely cool and nice team bonding.

**Q. Nell, we were just talking to Kayla and Tonie about what's happened to this program over the three years they've been here. What kind of satisfaction do you take at this point knowing there's still more games to play but going from not making the tournament, having a little bit of a reset, to WBIT to ninth seed in the tournament now?**

NELL FORTNER: Yeah, look, I'm super proud of this team and really happy for them to have this opportunity. KB and Tonie have been there at the very beginning. It's really special to watch them persevere and really train hard, continue to believe and continue to stay loyal and devoted to the process of what we were trying to do, because it was

tough.

I'm in my sixth year. When I got to Georgia Tech, we went to the tournament two years in a row, COVID hit, and it really set us back with recruiting. It's just taken us a while to gear it back up.

Super proud of them for their loyalty and their vision of what -- believing in the vision. It feels really good to be here, but we don't just want to be here. We're here to make noise and see what we can do with this opportunity.

**Q. Losing five of six is not the ideal way to end a season, obviously, but considering the factors that four of those were NCAA Tournament teams you lost to and you finished by taking a No. 2 seed down to the absolute wire in a game that could have gone either way, are there positives to be gained from the way you finished even though the win/loss wasn't what you wanted?**

NELL FORTNER: Yes, there are. I was really pleased with how we played in the ACC Tournament and really extremely disappointed in how it finished. I could go on and on about how that thing finished, but it took me about three, four days to get over that. I'm not sure I am yet. But the kids played super hard, and they did everything we asked of them, and we gave ourselves a chance to win that game.

But I liked how we played against Virginia Tech leading into that game and finished strong. So, it felt like we were getting our sea legs back under us from struggling with some injury things that were happening to us in that losing streak and just -- but we continued to battle. So yeah.

**Q. Tonie and Kayla were just saying, I think yesterday, you guys went to Santa Monica. How do you balance enjoying the experience, enjoying the opportunity of being in a new place, but also making sure you're focusing on business, which is, you're trying to win a few games here this weekend, as well.**

NELL FORTNER: You know, that's a great question because the one thing I would say is, first and foremost, these are young kids, and this is an exciting time. You have to find ways to help them stay excited and still be a young kid. To come to California, and most of them have never been out here, and to be as close to the Santa Monica Pier as we were, and they got to go see that. We traveled all day, we practiced in the morning, we traveled, we got here, we had plenty of time to do that.

So really the timing of it all worked out great because we're not that far from it. So, they were able to go there and

enjoy a couple hours. You know how they like to take pictures and put it on Instagram and do all that kind of stuff. They just had to do it, and they had fun.

Today, they knew -- we talked through it all. Today, they knew, this is a business day. We've had to get up this morning, eat breakfast, do film, and get ready for this afternoon. Then we'll go.

But you have to find your moments when you can have fun.

**Q. Something we've seen specifically in this city with women's basketball with USC and UCLA being so good, there seems to be just a huge interest in the sport. It's really growing. From your perspective in Atlanta with this program, how have you seen the popularity of women's basketball growing where you're sitting?**

NELL FORTNER: Yeah, it's phenomenal. Everybody wants to be able to take advantage of it in their specific area of the country. We're fortunate that we're in Atlanta, and Georgia is full of really good players, really good players. We've been able to keep a lot of them home here recently.

That's been really good for us. So, the vision is, hey, let's grow it right here in Atlanta just like it's been growing in Iowa, let's say. Let's fill our arena up like that with some talent that people recognize their names from watching them grow up as young players.

So, we're excited about what the future looks like at Georgia Tech, but it's taken us a little while to build that and to relay that vision and to put it out there to a group that hasn't had that -- hasn't seen that, really, in that area of the country at that point in time -- at this point in time.

We're looking forward to what the future is.

**Q. On paper, it looks like there's some similarities between you and Richmond in terms of teams that like to space the floor, shoot from the perimeter and do things. They have a very interesting lineup. They have the A-10 Player of the Year, some things going on. What will you have to be successful at to win?**

NELL FORTNER: We've got to guard them. That's the number one thing. You have to defend at this level. At this point in time of the season, you'd better be ready to guard somebody because that's where it starts. They are extremely -- already, will be extremely hard to guard because they spread you out so well.

And if they're not spreading you out, they're cutting in there and taking advantage of how you're having to play your defense to stop threes from going up.

You know, at this time of the year, you've got to play with a lot of heart, and you've got to play with a lot of effort and understand what you're guarding. So, the studying of Richmond, yeah, we've studied them, and hopefully, we've relayed the message of how we're going to guard them tomorrow, and we'll see what we can do. They're good.

**Q. Some of the Richmond players were saying they understood the importance of Pauley Pavilion in terms of college basketball and what it's meant over the decades. Are you going to say anything about that to your players, or do they already understand the importance of this venue?**

NELL FORTNER: I mean, it's interesting with kids today. We take for granted that they know everything that's in our head. I'll ask them something, hey, what do you think about this band, and they're like, who? Or anything. They're like, what?

We have not dove into that yet. At some point, we will. But you don't want to flood their heads with all kinds of stuff. They've got enough to worry about when they're trying to get locked in and focused in on the job at hand.

I've played here a long, long time ago in a tournament. Billie Moore was a really good friend of mine. I knew her forever. She coached me in a high school All-American game. So, I know about Pauley Pavilion. It's an honor to play here and to be in this environment and to know that John Wooden walked the sidelines. It's just like, wow.

But anyway, they'll know where they're playing.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned what you had to go through with COVID. The last five years has been a monumental change in college athletics. How have you adapted to both the changes caused by COVID to now the conference realignments, NIL, the entire changing landscape of college athletics?**

NELL FORTNER: Yeah, I was just talking about those exact things that you just mentioned. Y'all, I got back in this profession in 2019. 2019. Everything that's happened since then, I'm thinking I'm coming back to college basketball, right? I'd been out for seven years. I'm coming back. All right, I've got my battery recharged, let's go. And then it's just one thing after the other thing after the other thing, and now we're still changing.

I mean, I just read an article on -- I don't want to get into it,

but it's just the amount of change has been astronomical. I can't wait to read the history on this period of time.

I mean, think about that. When you start reading about the history of this period of time -- let's not even talk about basketball, just everything else that's going on.

Yeah, the changes have been tremendous, but this is how I approach it. I hate to say that it is what it is, but everything changes. Change is inevitable in everything.

But these changes, really I look at them and go, okay, this is what it is now, okay, let's move forward, boom. And you just have to move on with it because it's not going anywhere and it's not going to go backwards.

Yes, we went through COVID. It set us back a couple years because recruiting at Georgia Tech, you've got to get people on campus, and we couldn't get them on campus, so that was tough, so we got behind.

But then we caught back up to that, and now we get into this other part of the change in NIL and transfer portal and all that, and again, we're just having to find our way through it, just like everybody else is.

It's not like we're at a disadvantage because we're the only ones dealing with it. It just is what it is. I don't know if I answered your question. Probably a lot of --

**Q. Speaking to some of those changes, this is the first time that the women's basketball tournament has units for the winning teams. What do you think that means for women's basketball programs and also just the sport in general growing in terms of monetizing what you guys do?**

NELL FORTNER: Look, that should have happened a long time ago, so don't get me started on that.

Yeah, I'm just happy that, finally, the door was opened to how wrong it's been for so long, and it's nice to see these things happening for women, that we are now going to get some -- the unit payout of this and to really be able to expand the marketing benefits, the partnerships, and really be able to expand the TV part of this.

I remember when I was working at ESPN, and this is true -- I don't know, I'll just say five years -- not five years ago, ten years ago. I'd be on the desk in the studio, and I'd say, Final Four -- Nell, you can't say that. I'm like, what? We couldn't say Final Four. I'm like, why can't we say Final Four?

So anyway, that's just one example. I'm like, this makes no

sense at all; what are we doing here? What's this for it all? What's for it all?

So, the way we were held down is really, really maddening and unfortunate. But hey, now we're on our way. Let's go. Can't look backwards, got to look forward, and now let's push it. Let's go. Hopefully, young girls continue to grow their game so we can continue to have a lot more Caitlin Clarks and Angel Reeses out there, so this game just thrives.

**Q. One of the changes we were talking about a few minutes ago was the fact that now in the ACC, you've got two schools that used to be in the Pac-12, Cal and Stanford. Have you reached out to those coaches at all to maybe get some help in scouting UCLA, or is that not something that you've done?**

NELL FORTNER: You know, no, we didn't do that. There's all kinds of ways to scout and people to reach out to, so there's definitely -- everybody reaches out to everybody, but I don't think we necessarily reached out to them because this is this year's UCLA team. This is this year's season.

The only thing -- Cal and Berkeley, it's a long way over here. That I do know. We were here a couple weeks ago, and here we are back again.

But scouting, God, there's a zillion ways to get information. But we need current information.

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