

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Mississippi State vs California

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

Cal Bears

Charmin Smith

Lulu Twidale

Michelle Onyiah

Media Conference

Mississippi State 59, California 46

CHARMIN SMITH: I know we'll get into the game but really what I told the team was aside from, this I'm really proud of this group and what we did this year. Michelle in her first season we won one game and now to be sitting here on 25 wins, and a record number of home wins and everything that we accomplished, I'm just really proud and I want them to remember that. It doesn't feel great right now.

We're obviously really disappointed in our performance today. But I think when the seven seniors or seven graduates from this team think about this year down the road, they will remember how they put their name on Cal Women's Basketball and got us back to a really special place.

Q. You and Charmin have stay storied history together. You grew up together. Can you contextualize how you guys have grown together over the course of these years and what Coach Smith means to you?

MICHELLE ONYIAH: Yeah, we grew a lot together, obviously, with this team and sophomore year, getting a little bit better a little bit better, a little bit better to be here now. We trust each other. I'm here obviously, and she's still here obviously. We said we could do this together tried to turn it around back into a tournament team.

Could have done better, obviously, this game. But overall, I think we deserved what we got, and like we did good together. We came around from the first year together. So



I think overall, like, we are still together -- we stuck together, and yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q. How much did that first quarter -- and can you talk about what happened in that first quarter in terms of what they were doing, what you guys were doing, and how much do you think that that set you guys back and gave you too big of a hole to dig out of?

LULU TWIDALE: I think our team we're just very used to coming out fast and being able to score the ball really well. I think it was more of an us thing than them. I think we -- there was nerves, obviously. Most of us, it's our first time in the tournament.

So yeah, I think us not being able to score definitely set us back. But I'm just proud of this team; that we don't fold easy. I'm proud that we are able to keep fighting to the end.

Q. Obviously it might be hard to think about right now but how special is it for the two of you to have been a part of such a special season for Cal Women's Basketball?

LULU TWIDALE: For me, most of my emotions is really about not getting an opportunity to play with this team again. I'm really grateful for my seniors. You know, Ioanna, Marta, Michelle; they were there for my freshman year. They have helped me grow to the player I am today.

They really just are like really good role models to me of what leaders look like. So yeah, I'm just really grateful to be a part of this program and a part of this team, and to be able to accomplish what we did this year.

MICHELLE ONYIAH: And for me, it's been a good year honestly. Having Lulu, having the transfers come in, having the team -- really special, obviously, 16-1 at home, beating Stanford twice, going to ACC, new conference. Playing really well in the ACC. Going to new schools. Going to East Coast. Like all the adversity we have at Cal, like, we did really well. Being the No. 1 school in the nation. We did really well for what we do, honestly.

I don't think there's any other team in the NCAA Tournament that's really good at academics and sports that's still there, like a top school, right.

So I'm happy for my team focusing on school and focusing on basketball and being able to do all that together because it's really hard to do that, and like, happy we stayed together, did really well this year to beat Stanford, ACC Conference and did really well.

Q. You mentioned that early on you guys were just not scoring, and we thought it had more to do with you guys and what Mississippi State was doing. What were the emotions when the shot weren't falling for you guys? Your offense was dominant all year. How difficult was it emotionally for that not to be working this game?

LULU TWIDALE: Yeah, like you said, we've been doing it all year. Obviously today wasn't our day. We tried to stay together as a group, and like, one of our coaches mentioned like if your stuff isn't falling or your in your head about something, give something to the next person. We just want to stay together and support one another on the court and fight to the end of the game.

Q. You mentioned what the senior class has done for you and now the man tell turns to you as one of the voices in the program for the future. What direction will you take as one of the premiere players in the program?

LULU TWIDALE: Well we just finished the season just now but like I said, I'm just very grateful to be a part of this program and be able to build this program with Charmin for the past couple years.

So I think just being able to stay focused, like take my break, and then yeah, really just get to work, get in the gym, get better as a basketball player, and when we have a new team, just being able to pour in as a leader and share my experiences with them to make sure that we are ready for whatever is to come.

Q. The three-point shooting and the turnovers jump off the stat sheet. How much was that you having an off-night, and how much was it they taking you out of your game?

CHARMIN SMITH: I think the three-point shooting, we had some looks that I expected to go down. I thought we ran some really good actions to get Lu and Yo open for shots, and they missed some that they usually make.

The turnovers, I mean, we knew that they would pressure.

You talked about the first quarter, we started 0-for-6 in layups. 0-for-6 on layups, and I don't think that had anything to do with Mississippi State.

And then when we missed those layups, we tried to dump it to Michelle, and we just threw it out-of-bounds a couple times. I think Lu was right in that, you know, there seemed to be some jitters and some kind of nerves out there that you know obviously didn't play into our favor.

Credit to Mississippi State. I mean, I think weren't they in the same situation as us last year, a bubble team and did not make it? And they looked poised. They smoked some early, too, but they were able to survive, kind of just that nerve-type thing and be a little bit better than us.

I looked at the state sheet. At some point they were shooting 25 percent from the field and it's 26-19. That's not any reason to freak out, the way that we were playing. But we couldn't get to where we could be ourselves.

It was just too many people that couldn't get into a groove, and that meant that we couldn't survive the turnovers and the missed shots, right. Because Mississippi State, I think they gave us chances. They only shot 34 percent from the field. But we weren't the best version of ourselves and we needed to be in order to beat a really good ACC team.

Q. You're just coming off this loss right now, so it's hard to think ahead too much. But what did this year mean for this program? You're losing seven graduates but do you have the confidence that you can build? It took a while to get to this point. But how much did a year like this do to make that shorter turnaround time going forward?

CHARMIN SMITH: I think we put Cal Women's Basketball back on the map, and I can tell in the interest we have some recruits and things like that. You know, even who I think we can go after is better than it was. You know, last year, we lost seven last year, too.

So we've done this before. We will be aggressive in the portal. The good thing is we can offer opportunity, and most people transferring want an opportunity to play, and we can also say now, like, Hey, we've done it before. Like you come here, we know how to win. We know how to get to the NCAA Tournament and, you, too, can put your face on this program and help to us win basketball games in the ACC.

I'm really excited about the future. I hope we can use this to springboard us into further success, and if we can get back here next year, it won't be our first rodeo. That's what you want is constant improvement and being in the ACC

tournament as an 8-seed is a drastic improvement for our program.

Q. Coach Purcell talked about active hands and that their length was unexpected. Can you just talk about the athletic matchup in the game today?

CHARMIN SMITH: Yeah, I wouldn't say it was unexpected. Like we expected it. It's not something that we handled very well. Their pressure, sometimes we are trying to run actions in, instead of catching it at the top of the key, lose catching it at the top of the jump ball circle. That's not where we want to initiate our offense.

Yes, their athleticism and their pressure forced us outside of our comfort zone, and we didn't respond fast enough.

Later in the second half, we were able to get Michelle in the mix a little bit, and that loosens things up for us. It was just too little, too late and definitely credit to Mississippi State.

Even on the offensive end, their guards were aggressive getting downhill, getting to the free throw line a ton. So it was -- we knew it was going to be a tough matchup. 8, 9 is typically a coin toss and they got the better of us today for sure.

Q. It seemed like a much more physical game today than maybe most this season. Is that something that you expected or is that something that kind of took you by surprise as the game kind of evolved?

CHARMIN SMITH: I didn't -- I don't know. I didn't feel like we got bullied or anything. I thought they were active. They were, as you mentioned, active hands and aggressive. We've seen that in the ACC. We've seen that with Northern Carolina; we've seen that with Duke; we've seen that with Notre Dame. I thought it was good basketball, right. They are a good team, and we didn't have our best day.

Q. Along the line of building on this momentum, what's the reality of how quickly that happens? What happens next?

CHARMIN SMITH: What is today, Saturday? The portal opens on Monday, and it's going to be crazy. There's no break, and we have to replace seven people that are graduating, essentially.

Now, we have a great freshman class coming in. We've got a McDonald's All-American coming in at the point guard position. Taylor Barnes from Texas. We're really excited about our group.

But we will be in the portal and we'll be aggressive in the portal. I know that we'll find the pieces that we need to be back here and hopefully get even further, similar to how we did last off-season.

Q. The situation right here with Michelle at the end is emblematic of the battle you guys have been in together over the years. There's always teaching moments; what has Michelle taught you on and off the court over the course of the years?

CHARMIN SMITH: She would want me to tell you that she's taught me to do what excites. That's her little slogan that drives me absolutely crazy. At one point, after I was frustrated with her at a game, I was like, How about, don't do what excites, do what freaking wins? And it wasn't actually "freaking."

I love Michelle. I'm so proud of, like, who she's developed into. I don't know, I think I've learned patience, and just to appreciate -- what I have in Michelle is appreciating the loyalty. Because it's not something that we see very often in our sport for someone to stay for five years. She could have left this program. I know people were offering her all kinds of money and doing things that they shouldn't have been doing, and she stuck with me. That means a lot. Because we weren't in the tournament. We didn't have, last week, 25 wins and things like that.

So I guess I'm more just grateful, and really appreciate her, and that's my family. Like I'll do anything for her. She will always have my support in whatever it is that she looks to do next.

Hopefully we can get her into WNBA training camp. I think she's deserving. But if not that, I know that she will be making medical devices or doing something as an engineer and be spectacular, and I'll be supporting her every step of the way.

Q. I know it's very immediate but what's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the lasting memory of this team?

CHARMIN SMITH: NCAA Tournament, right. Something that had not been done in six years and is really hard to do. I'm glad we did it now. I don't know if they are going to add teams, 96 teams, all this stuff they are talking about. We made the field of 68. I'm extremely proud of that.

We fought through ACC travel. We swept Stanford for the first time since '86. Like there's so many things. But if there's one that's on my mind is when you come in in June and you bring players to meet, and you have that first



huddle and you say, you guys, we are going dancing in March, that's the goal now. Like write it down. We are going to do that. And then you actually do it, like, of course, that's the thing that I'm going to remember.

Q. Turnovers were a thing kind of all year and for a lot of the season you guys got a way with it and you were able to out shoot those turnovers but your last two games of the year, Notre Dame and now here were really costly. Why do you think that stayed a consistent issue all year, and what do you learn about that going into next year and trying to not have that be as much concern?

CHARMIN SMITH: Yeah, I mean, I think at times we force the issue and we try to do too much. And it's something that I've chosen to live with, you know. I trust our players. I like for them to be confident. So I don't want to be a coach that, you know, is constantly yanking people in or out and that type of thing.

But I don't think that it will be an issue for us. It's something that we have to fix, right, and it's hard in the middle of the season. You have a flow. You have people that you've got to ride with.

But just as we did last year in saying, look, we need to be better defensively and we've got Jayda in here and got people to really commit to being better defenders; Michelle staying out of foul trouble, and that was the growth of our team. This will definitely be an area of growth next year where I hope we won't be talking about the turnovers as much as we did this year.

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