

Mountain West Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Fresno State Bulldogs

Coach Jaime White

Saga Ukkonen

Mariah Elohim

Postgame Press Conference

Fresno State - 67, San Jose State - 62

JAIME WHITE: I mean, I think it's nice to get the first game under your belt. Obviously a little bit of game nerves early.

And I thought San Jose did a good job just being real physical. And we felt like at halftime we needed to get to the line a little bit more, get down the middle, get drives to the basket a little bit more. And I thought we did that.

I'm proud of these two. We needed every point we could get. They weren't coming easy. And, again, San Jose did a good job defensively.

But just got to the free-throw line in the second half, scored, especially we scored it from the outside. We scored from the inside. Just really proud of our kids. Hit some free throws late and got it done.

Q. You two combined for 29 points. What was working for you guys? How did you get into your rhythm?

MARIAH ELOHIM: I think they came out pretty, like, close on defense. For me personally after I hit the two shots they were pretty much on me. I think the drives were open.

Taija got, like, I think three or four drives to the lane, got fouled. And when we had open kick-outs we were able to hit those and knock some of those down.

SAGA UKKONEN: Just like Mariah said, they were on her pretty tight. So the lane was open for me. And then also I just like to look for her in transition. I know we got one shot off at least off of transition. And one where nobody was guarding me and you found me and I made it.

Q. You talk about the lanes opening. That's kind of



what went into that run in the third quarter, 11-0. What does that do for your confidence in that moment just trying to close it out?

MARIAH ELOHIM: I think that was pretty important. When our 3s aren't falling, jump shots like that, it's important for us to get in the paint. Taija and Saga do a good job getting to the paint. If our defenders, if our shooters, defenders are hugged up, that leaves open drives. If they help, then we have those kick-outs.

SAGA UKKONEN: I feel it's really an either/or. It's either a layup or kick-out. It's pretty hard to guard, honestly, when me and Taija are going downhill because we can find open people pretty easily and we can also go and finish. It does definitely bring confidence when we can get in there and make some easy shots.

Q. What's tough defensively about handling Simmons and Summers when they're hitting like that?

MARIAH ELOHIM: Number one is a very hard guard. She's going to get her points regardless and her shots up regardless. We did the best we could to try to defend her. I think getting on her strong hand and then our game plan today was to help more off her.

She still did what she does. But I think it was a good game plan for us. It worked most of the first half and for the whole game.

SAGA UKKONEN: They're really good players. Simmons scored, what, 32 last time we played her. So we basically took half of her points off. I think we did a much better job on her today.

Both are great players. It is hard to guard them. They're quick and can shoot 3s and can get to the rim and shoot the mid-range. But we did a good job on them.

Q. This was your third match-up with them this season. You handled them the other two times. Tonight, they actually had the lead with under two minutes to go. What made it so difficult to take care of



them tonight?

MARIAH ELOHIM: I think this is the first game of the tournament. So everyone's -- it's win or go home -- so everybody is coming out here with that energy, that fight, knowing that it could be the last game. It could not be.

But I think they came out very aggressive, physical, and they weren't going away. So the little lead that we did have, we had to keep going because we knew they weren't going to go away.

Good for us, we were able to lock up on defense and make some shots and keep the lead in the end.

JAIME WHITE: We had 12 turnovers in the first half.

SAGA UKKONEN: I was going to say that.

JAIME WHITE: Sorry, took your thunder. But only five in the second half. So the ability to take care of the ball helped. And I think down the stretch, hitting our free throws, getting some fouls, getting to the rim was good.

Q. But what the heck, Coach, you can chime in, too, I think it was 1:43 or something like that to go in the game, they are on an 11-0 run I believe at that point. They hit a couple of free throws to take the first lead in a while, since you had taken the lead in the third quarter. What's your mentality at that point knowing you've had the control of the game, you've lost control of the game, now they're ahead and you've got under two minutes to pull this game out? What was the mentality and what was the game plan at that point?

JAIME WHITE: Saga, I'll let you go.

SAGA UKKONEN: I mean, every basketball game has runs. Like every team has runs throughout the ball game. I think when we go on a run, obviously we feel really good and then when San Jose went on their run, we just have to kind of regroup and come back together and just, like, focus on every possession and just get stops and get something good on offense -- either get fouled, get to the free-throw line or just hit an open shot.

It's not really much. You've just got to keep playing. You just have to keep playing. There's not much to it.

MARIAH ELOHIM: I think we communicated really well throughout the entire game, especially when it got close. Every timeout or break we had we were coming together, just talking about our offense, what we're in, what defense we're in. I think the communication at the end of the game helped us stay composed together as a team.

JAIME WHITE: I thought Taija, didn't she draw a foul right there, go to the free-throw line, maybe, when it was tied or to tie it?

SAGA UKKONEN: Yeah, she tied it.

JAIME WHITE: That was big. And, again, I think it's what they said, the momentum, when it shifts, you've got to kind of ignore it because there's still two minutes, there's still three minutes. We still have possessions. We still have opportunities. You've just got to make sure to take care of your opportunities.

Again, I thought we were doing such a good job of attacking the basket. We were either going to get to the rim or possibly draw the foul. Mia's foul on the baseline drive was really good too. I think that put us up 2 when she went to the free-throw line on that one.

Q. I feel like we've all kind of touched on it at this point, but that 11-point run in the third quarter, it included four free throws, two layups and a 3. Obviously, again, the three pointers aren't falling like you maybe would have liked. Was that kind of a reflection of what you guys needed in that moment was just to get to the basket, get to the free-throw line?

JAIME WHITE: Well, when you've tried everything else, you gotta make a change. We had seen some film and we knew that was going to be an option if A, B and C doesn't work. And then we also had -- our post player was in foul trouble and fouled out.

So Maria K, she fouled out. So we were going to have to use our advantage, which I thought was the driving and attacking. And I think we had a lot of those five that were out there could handle. They could set screens, they could do all the things, and they could score in three ways.

So that was nice to have five people that were able to do that. And you had to guard everybody. Nobody could sag off or play off anyone.

Q. Once Maria fouls out, Mia gets fouled, I think, 10 times in the game today and then she hits I think all of her free throws as well.

JAIME WHITE: Except for the last one.

Q. Except for the last one. It is what it is. But I think she hit the two that gave you the lead that ended up winning the game. How big was she on the night?

JAIME WHITE: Free throws in general were huge for us. I

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

thought they came out and were physical and wanted to take us out in that way. And people have played Mia that way. And I thought everybody kind of stayed their ground and just kept working through that physicality, especially in the second half when we turned the ball over a little bit.

We really needed to take care of the ball in the second half. We talked about taking care of it, making sure we're rebounding, getting shots at the rim or getting multiple drives.

Q. Looking ahead, is it Colorado State you've got?

JAIME WHITE: Yes.

Q. I think you only played them once during the regular season. Big win for them. I think 20-point win. They got off to a really fast start, as I recall. Built up a big first half lead. Emma Ronsiek did what she does. She went off for a couple of dozen. What are you going to need to do to contain her and have your way with the Rams tomorrow?

JAIME WHITE: They're a hard guard because they play a five-out and she is so versatile. You almost don't know who to put on her because she's so mobile. And we were impressed when we played them how much she moves off the ball. She's constantly moving.

And then I think they've had a lot of other kids step up and play good down the stretch. So we'll watch some film. I do think we can play small. So we could play small and guard their guards, basically, but still you've got to rebound and you've got to score.

As good as they are offensively, they are good defensively. So they are not going to allow you to get to the paint. They're going to make you take contested 3s. They're going to rotate.

But we got this win under our belt. It's hard to sit back -- it's hard and good to have the bye. I said the only time you're excited about the bye is when you're in the championship game because now you've only played two games going into three.

But that first game, it's kind of nice to get it under your belt so your kids are a little more relaxed. I felt like we were a little bit nervous today. When we were down, we were nervous.

But the kids, they fought through. I think we regroup and we give it a shot and just really try to hone in on our strengths and their weaknesses and hope we play better than we did tonight.

Q. I think earlier you were talking about you exploited some things tonight where you saw you had an advantage. Where do you see that advantage with Colorado State? They are a small team, kind of. Do you think maybe in the post you might be able to have an advantage with them?

JAIME WHITE: You know, I think you've got to score -- you've got to try to score in the middle of the floor because if you have the ball on one side, they're helping over, extensively helping over. So you're not getting to the paint.

If you look to score down the middle of the floor, you're going to get to the paint a little bit better. And then they do collapse on the pressure or on the drive. So you should be able to get the kick-outs. Now, that all sounds really good right now but we're going to have to get something together.

But at the end of the day, they've got to play well too. They've got to guard our players. And I think we do have some fresh legs on the bench ready to go. So we did play five of those kids quite a bit. So I'm hopeful that we have some bench kids that can match and do what they need to do.

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