

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Rice vs LSU

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Pete Maravich Assembly Center

LSU Tigers

Coach Kim Mulkey

Angel Reese

Hailey Van Lith

Media Conference

Q. This is for Angel. Just going into it this year as opposed to last year, how differently does it feel for you, and what is different for you?

ANGEL REESE: Of course, last year we didn't have really expectations, of course.

Of course, coming into this year, we have a national championship projected number. We were No. 1 coming in this year, took a couple losses this year, but finished out the year strong.

So it's definitely different, a different feeling now. I feel like more of a chip on our shoulder this year going into it. But I think our team is gelling at the right time. And I feel super comfortable.

Last year's team, I didn't really know how far we would go. We knew what we had. But this year's team, we know what we have at this point, and now it's just win or go home.

Q. Hailey, just the steps forward y'all have taken as a team defensively, and you specifically, where is your confidence level at and how do you feel like you've taken those steps forward?

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I think the main thing was just time with each other and time in practice and an emphasis on building that part of our team.

I think at the beginning of this season, we were caught up in how well we could score and how fun that was, and we neglected the other side of the game. And we were real



with ourselves. We recognized that that was something we needed to fix. And then we fixed it. So it was pretty simple.

Q. Angel, just the rest that y'all have been able to get over the past couple weeks. I know you said after the game you could play right away. How valuable has that been, and how valuable has the practice time been?

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, it's been great. Being able to come back -- our goal was to play at home. And being able to come back home and play these two games is going to be amazing for us and amazing for LSU and the community and what we are able to do. Pack another game out. I believe the game is sold out tomorrow.

So being able to come back, rest up so, rest up some of the nagging injuries that we had and then being able to collectively come together and just focus on what we're known to be.

And defense is something that we've been really emphasizing, and I'm just happy where we are defensively.

Q. More of a general women's basketball question. Have either of you at this point in your careers had any discussions with either advisors or agents about the financial wisdom of WNBA versus staying in school? And if you have had those conversations, kind of what have you learned from those?

ANGEL REESE: For me, I've honestly learned that regardless I'm going to be able to make money staying or going. Understanding that my brain has been built where I know that more than being in college it's something that I can do.

Like I have a brain outside of here where the deals are going to follow me if I leave or stay. And I've built that relationship with a lot of these brains. I don't just have brains that are in college, I have brains that are long-term deals that are just past college.

And I think that's the difference. Like my Reebok deal, and



I'm sure Hailey's Adidas deal, that's going to go on past college.

Of course we may not have the same benefits of the same training rooms, the commercial flights and stuff like that. And I think that's the con of everything, but it's a win-or-lose situation regardless of the decision that we're going to make. But you have to make a sacrifice and understanding what you want and what it's going to take.

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I think goes along the same line as that, you have to kind of look at what type of player you are. There's some people that have to capitalize in college because they're not a pro-type player. They're likability is going to stay in college.

And I think for me, that's not the case. I'm a pro-type player. Like the deals will follow, like Angel said. And, I mean, the one downfall really also is like visibility. And the amount of times we play on ESPN and ABC and all these major television channels, that becomes a lot less when you go to the WNBA where it's at right now.

So you're not going to be in the media as much, but from a brand aspect, as long as you do what you need to do and keep up that part of your life, then brands, they're going to follow you when you go to the league.

Q. Those are good answers. Hailey, if Poa can't play, what does the guard position look like for the start of the tournament, and how comfortable are you guys executing in that way?

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I mean, I think at this point, if Poa can't play, I'm going to have to be the primary point guard, which if that's what needs to be done, then that's what needs to be done.

We're at the part of the season where if something has to happen, you've just got to get it done. And if that is me being a traditional point guard and not scoring that much, I'm just trying to get to the next round. And that's what it is at this point. I'm too old for all that other stuff. I just want to help my team win.

And we would love to have Poa. She helps our team a lot in a lot of different ways. But the reality is, if she can't play, then we need to adjust.

Q. For both of y'all, Rice is playing their best basketball. Round one, obviously you've got to get through round one to make it to round two. But what do you expect to see from this team, from both y'all, from the post position and the guard position?

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, they have a big post, a big body post down there. We watched a lot of film on them. Just being able to understand our versatility and use that as our advantage. I'm speaking from the post position. I think they do a great job being able to stretch our. Their four player is like a guard, probably will be a guard on any other team. Super versatile. And just understanding our matchups is going to be super important.

But on the defensive side, just being able to help our guards as much as we can. I think that's what has gotten us this far so far. Just being able to be there for our guards and helping them with our guards. They have a left-hand point guard which is really good.

So just doing whatever it takes to win is going to be important.

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I think you see with these smaller schools in the beginning of the tournament, they're going to be smaller than us, but they are very versatile. They have a stretch four. They can shoot on the perimeter. Our bigs are going to have to come out and be able to guard, which we know they can. We have very athletic bigs that can move their feet.

And, yeah, there's certain challenges to it, but we also have advantages that we're going to capitalize on -- the size, the athleticism, the experience at this level. And, yeah, we're very excited to play them.

Q. Hailey, you've been on teams in the past that have made deep runs in the NCAA Tournament. So I'm curious of your perspective of this LSU team, what you remember about those teams and their makeup versus what you've got now here at LSU. Does it compare, contrast, and do you think this team is built for a deep run?

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, in my experience, when I feel good about our team, it's that we're peaking at the right time. You can play good at the beginning of the season, but if you're not peaking at the end, like it's not going to happen for you in the tournament.

You've got to be peaking, and everyone has to be on the same level, and everyone has to be bought in to what the objective of this team is.

And like my year when we made the Final Four run, we were peaking at the right time. And everyone on the team was bought in to winning. And we were committed to whatever my role had to be for that game to get to the next round, like that's what everyone was going to do.

And I really think we're at a point with this team where people are willing to do that. And that's what you need. So I'm happy with it.

Q. Hailey, we all saw your reaction when you saw Louisville's name pop up on the thing. What were you thinking? Did you say, I know the committee was going to do this? What did you think? And Merissah Russell was in here earlier, and she said you were roommates. Just what is your reaction to them being here where you are now?

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I mean, I think most of the reaction was I wasn't even thinking of that. Like that wasn't what was going through my mind at that time. So it was more of like a surprise.

But, yeah, me and Merissah are really close. That's a relationship that I'll have for the rest of my life. She's a great friend of mine.

And, you know, I love to support her in any way I can, but I'm a competitor, and if the time comes to compete, then I compete.

Q. Aneesah's play this year, and how valuable has it been to your game?

HAILEY VAN LITH: Yeah, I think for me at least in a pick-and-roll situation, Aneesah is unique because she can pick and pop and she can do a few different things out of options with that. And I can give her the ball in unique places because she can create far from the basket. And she has a little bit more of a guard skill set with her size.

And so, yeah, I mean, it's been challenging learning. I've never played with a player like that, so it's been challenging for me as a point guard to learn how to help make her successful the best way that I can.

And so, you know, that's been something that I've been grateful for the opportunity to learn to play with someone like her.

ANGEL REESE: I mean, I feel like I've said this before. Aneesah is not a second team player. She's not an honorable mention player. And I think sometimes she gets overshadowed because of me, and it's tough. I hate that for her. But she works hard. She makes me better every day.

We don't go as far as we do and as far as we've been without Aneesah, her defense, her work ethic. She works hard every day. She doesn't complain about anything. She always comes in and just has a mindset that she

wants to get better every day.

So being able to have a player like that, a teammate like that, a sister like that where you just love to have her, you always want to have somebody like that on your team, but you don't want to go against her.

Q. Angel, how would you say you would summarize the arc of your season so far in terms of not just adjusting to a number of new high-profile teammates and figuring out your role among them, but also just how much fame you came into this season with versus last year and managing all that?

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, I mean, it just goes into what our theme for the year is, dig deep roots. We talked about that from the beginning of the season. We know most of our statuses, we know everything we come with, the fame, everything that comes with, we just have to put that to the side and understand what it's going to take to win.

And I think in the beginning of the season, like Hailey said, we focus so much on offense, offense, offense, offense, and we neglected defense, defense, defense, defense and what it's going to take. We can't just beat these teams and outscore these teams. These teams are really good and they can outscore you.

And we've seen that earlier on this season. Our first game out of the gate, Colorado, they killed us. We didn't play any defense, offensively we were struggling.

So just being able to see us, being able to put everything else to the side, not care about stats, not care about personal goals and understand what it's going to take to win a national championship.

We didn't have the most talented team last year to win the championship, and this year we have one of the most talented teams in the country. So it's going to be a difference in the -- it's a different shift to understanding like what it's really going to take to win this thing.

And like he was saying earlier, if Poa can't go, we won the national championship because of the bench. Me, Alexis, and Jas didn't play really much that Iowa game. Me, Alexis, and KP didn't play. Jas, Poa came in. That bench is going to be what's going to be important. And Coach keeps emphasizing, Janae, we're going to need you. Aalyah, we're going to need you. Everybody from the bench, we're going to need you guys.

So just understanding what it takes to win is going to be really, really important at the end.

Q. Mikaylah, being in this position, what do you tell her as this thing gets started?

ANGEL REESE: I think Flau'jae can be somebody that can tell her how to feel. She's a starter. Flau'jae was a starter last year. One of the best freshmen in the country, her and Flau'jae were both freshmen, in the country.

So just being able to kind of relax. I mean, it's overwhelming, your first tournament. Being able to be home. She's in Louisiana, which is home. I remember being at Maryland and hosting home for the first time.

So I know her nerves are built up. She wants to do great. But, again, like I said, she has dropped everything to understand what it's going to take to win defensively, being able to be in the stands, understanding her matchups as a freshman. And I think she's done a great job doing that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time.

We're pleased to be joined by head coach Kim Mulkey. We'll open up the floor for questions for head coach Kim Mulkey.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about last year Poa. Is she available tomorrow? Do you anticipate her being able to ready to go?

KIM MULKEY: Yes. She should be available unless has changed overnight. She did practice yesterday. So if you're out there practicing, I'm assuming you're cleared. But, honestly, I didn't even ask. We just went to work. So unless something has happened between yesterday's practice and today, I assume I'll see her today, and she'll be good to go.

Q. Rice obviously won the tournament four straight games there. Just where do you start with your evaluation of them and where they attack?

KIM MULKEY: Well, we certainly watched the four games of the tournament. I'm very familiar with Rice's coaching staff. Two of my former managers at Baylor are assistant coaches for them. So they're going to know a lot more about my philosophy and things we do probably than I will what they do.

But I'm very proud of them. They had to win the tournament to get in, it looks like. And when you win four games and your back's against the wall, that means you're playing pretty good basketball.

And I anticipate, like I do all games, that they will play their best, and we will hopefully play our best. They play

majority of man. Seen some 1-3-1 zone trapping in the corners on the baseline.

And I'm going to screw up names, but their point guard and their four player are pretty darn good basketball players. But they just don't stand out, they're a very balanced team. They make about six threes a game. And it will be exciting for them. It will be exciting for us.

Q. And Angel was talking about it, but Flau'jae's approach this year, obviously compared to last year where it was just a new environment for her, what have you seen from that so far?

KIM MULKEY: Maturity. It's kind of hard to realize that the word maturity in being a sophomore go hand in hand with Flau'jae, but it really does. The experience she gained last year, not just playing time but just the environment of the NCAA Tournament. She's just a lot more poised and mature in her approach.

I think she's playing her best basketball of the year. Flau'jae is just a joy when you watch her play. She has a joy about her, and you can't take your eyes off of her.

Q. Aneesah has talked about part of the reason why she came here was to play in the tournament. So what are you hoping to see from her, and how do you think she can help you make a run?

KIM MULKEY: Morrow, she just had an unbelievable year. To be a new player, whether you're a freshman or a transfer, to fit in comfortably, it takes time. And I think that she has fit in comfortably quicker than I thought that she would.

And a lot of that has to do with her energy. He just has a motor. And she starts the game the same way she finishes it. I'm sure she gets tired, but I don't look on the floor and think I got to get her off the floor, she's tired.

She's an undersized post player that can get up with the best of them in that paint area, and yet she could guard you on the perimeter if she needs to.

And this is exactly why she came. She told me she wanted to get to the post season.

Q. Your philosophy is defensive rebounding, defense and rebounding. Both Angel and Hailey said that in the start of the season, for them, it was all about points, and now they feel like they're playing their best basketball defensively. Do you agree with that?

KIM MULKEY: Yes. And I don't want it -- I hope they

didn't come across and sound very selfish. I've said all along, we can score the ball, on our worst day, I've got that many scorers. But we had to buy in to be a better defensive team. Rebounding was going to be okay because you had Angel back. You knew that was a walking double-double. Then you add Morrow to the mix. We lose Sa'Myah. So then you add Aalyah to the mix.

I just have also thought if we're going to go very far in the playoffs, we have to get better through the course of the year defensively.

And I think that's where our most improvement has been, is that nobody likes defense. When you have that many scorers on a team, I doubt any of them had to be the defensive stopper growing up. If we can do it collectively, if we can help each other, take pride in it and get excited about it as much as we do the offensive end, I think you can have a good season and a good run in the playoffs.

And it's new for them. Maybe not so much Angel as it was -- I think you said Hailey. Hailey has to defend at a new position up top as a point guard, and then I ask her to go to the off guard when Poa is in the game. And hold them accountable. I mean, just really have those practices where we don't pick a basketball.

Q. Angel mentioned earlier that last year they didn't have the national championship team, but this year they have the talent and they have the people for it. How do you feel what's the difference between last year's team and this year's team going into the first game of the tournament?

KIM MULKEY: I think last year nobody -- nobody was talking about us getting to a Final Four. I think people were saying just go one step further than you did the year before. Nobody was ever talking about our team being good enough to get to a Final Four.

And I think it just started snowballing. I think when you win the national championship or you get to a Final Four, then expectations, whether it's fair or not, they think you're supposed to do it again.

I don't know if it can be done again. Certainly that's a goal of ours, and we do have talent to do it. But it takes a lot of things to go right to do it. And you have to be playing your best basketball. You've got to stay away from injuries. You've got to have just a tiny bit of luck on the way, some play that goes your way.

And we'll see. I know we'll play hard. I know that our culture is whatever happens we're going to go down fighting. That's just how we are. We just fight for every

loose ball. We fight for every rebound. We fight for just the tip-off. We fight for the jump ball.

And if you do that, you can live with whatever happens.

Q. Mikaylah's progress over the past couple weeks, getting her back into shape, getting her ready to play, how has that been going?

KIM MULKEY: She hasn't missed a beat in practice. She's been out there every possession. And Mikaylah to me is one of the best mid-range shooters that I've ever coached. And she can shoot the three ball. She can take you hard and be strong off the dribble.

But she's got -- she's got to get back in the flow on the floor during a game. And I thought we gave her enough minutes in the SEC Championship. She some hit buckets in that game. And if you ask Mikaylah, she'll tell you she needed to do more. And that's what competitors do.

So this will be her first shot at a playoff game. So hopefully she'll be excited and have those butterflies and then do what she does, and that's play basketball.

Q. Both of the girls that were in here, Angel and Hailey, talking about peaking at the right time, and it's something that you've mentioned over the last couple of weeks. How much do you see that fight and that extra effort in your team now here down the stretch?

KIM MULKEY: Well, I certainly saw it throughout and through the SEC Championship. Now, we've been off about how many days now? So I don't know really if we'll be rusty or not. But that's why I said after the game I wish we could go play quickly because you want to keep that.

So hopefully that will carry over into the playoffs. But we have had a little time in between that run and the next game. So and you've got to be careful on the floor, how much you do on the floor, particularly when you're trying to heal players.

So hopefully we're still where we were when we played in that championship game.

Q. You mentioned your team's talent. I'm curious, if you look back at some of your Baylor teams over the years, what sets this team apart in terms of talent from some of your other talented teams that made a deep run into the tournament?

KIM MULKEY: Well, you don't compare teams. That'd be, as I tell you, like comparing your children. What are some qualities that this team has? If you're thinking about those

teams you coached that went to Final Fours and won championships, one, you better have talent. We have the talent.

The second thing that's very important is experience. Do we have enough experience? I don't know. When you think of experienced players, the majority of those that get minutes, I can only think of Angel Reese and Flau'jae. Morrow doesn't have this experience. Hailey had a Final Four experience with Louisville. And then Mikaylah, being a freshman. Poa has that experience. So you have a -- I guess a good balance of experience, but you sure would like to have more.

So I think those two things take you through the playoffs. I also think you have to have good guard play. As good as Angel is and as good as Morrow and all those guys, they're really reliant on guard play. And guards have to get them the ball when they rebound the ball, the guards have to bring it up the floor. So I think you have to have good guard play in order for your team to go far.

Now, what is good guard play? It's different for each team. Some teams need a lot of scoring from their guards. Some teams just need management, just get the ball where it's supposed to be.

We can score the ball. So if we're scoring the ball at the guard spot and those guys inside are scoring the ball and rebounding, it makes it tough for people to guard us.

Q. The girls also talked about defense, specifically win by outscoring people. How pleased are you to hear that message coming from your players that their defensive intensity is what's gotten them to this point?

KIM MULKEY: I think I've said all along we can score the ball, but against good defensive teams, you've got to be able to defend too. And I think we've learned from some of the losses we've had this year, there are other teams out there that can play. There's other teams out there that can defend. And when you meet those teams, you better be able to match that defensive intensity.

Q. How important is it going to be for your bench in this postseason run?

KIM MULKEY: How important is what?

Q. The play from your bench?

KIM MULKEY: Oh. Listen, in the perfect world, you want to play eight or nine players. We lost that. We lost that early in the year.

So what you're having happen now is you're pretty much going eight if you play Janae and Poa coming off the bench, and then you've got Aalyah.

So two of those coming off the bench and one on the floor are freshmen, true freshmen. And so I know that their nerves will be kind of fresh and exciting, and yet you hope they settle in and help you win a ball game or two.

Q. So NIL question. I don't know if you saw Saban's comments, but just wondering is there anything about that, because there's so much of it here, that has made the job more difficult or less fun for you in any way?

KIM MULKEY: I didn't see his comments. Was that something in an article? You got to remember, I don't read y'all's stuff. If it's something that somebody sends me that I can use to motivate a team. I know he retired. So tell me what you're referring to.

Q. Yeah, he was essentially saying that he felt like it had changed the athletes' and their families' priorities a lot in terms of developing as students and men and football players, and it's really all about, well, what can I get, you know, and so forth. So it made it less rewarding for him as a coach, I guess. And I don't know to what extent how does it affect -- how do you feel like it's affected women's basketball or your job?

KIM MULKEY: Well, how old is Saban? Would he say that if it was 45 or 50? I don't know. I think if you're young and it's the rules set before you, you have to adjust. I think LSU adjusted to NIL before I was ever hired. I was hearing stuff about -- what was it? NILSU.

But that doesn't mean his feelings are not real. That doesn't mean his feelings are not shared by many people. But, gosh, through the years of my coaching, you have to adjust and adapt to the three-point line, to the smaller basketball, to being on television more, to be -- I just am of the belief that if you're going to coach, you better adjust. If you don't feel like you can, then you hope you can retire just like he did and walk out in a blaze of glory.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

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