

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Middle Tennessee vs LSU

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

Middle Tennessee Lady Raiders Rick Insell

Courtney Whitson

Savannah Wheeler

Media Conference

LSU 83, Middle Tennessee 56

THE MODERATOR: We have head coach Rick Insell and Courtney Whitson and Savannah Wheeler joining us.

Coach, we'll give you the opportunity to make a comment about the game.

RICK INSELL: I've been doing this for about 48 years, and I can remember one or two games like this. I don't know how many games, AAU travel team. It's hard to overcome 37 free-throws to 9.

That's my opening statement.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the players, please.

Q. Y'all were up nine early in the third quarter. What exactly happened as you all got blitzed on a 41-20-something run? What exactly happened?

COURTNEY WHITSON: We just had some mental mistakes. We knew in games like this we can't let one mental mistake lead to another, and I think we continued to let -- we didn't sustain the run like we've been doing all year.

We knew they were going to make that push at some point. Once they made that push on us, we continued to make mental mistakes, and the small details we didn't take care of that led to that largely.

Q. Savannah, y'all had a lot of success in the first half, particularly in the second quarter. What was working



really well for you all during that stretch where you were able to go on some big runs?

SAVANNAH WHEELER: I would say normally you go back in the season, normally I feel like we have a slow start in the first quarter compared to the second half, but today I guess it kind of flipped a little bit.

I would say the only thing that was really working for us was just getting downhill, trying to get downhill and make them commit a foul.

I would say that in the first half a few of us did hit some shots, but in the second half just kind of went downhill. Kind of going off of what Courtney said, just mental mistakes in the second half.

Q. Courtney, obviously the foul trouble made the second half a big challenge for you guys. Was there anything y'all think y'all could have done different defensively to prevent some of the foul calls?

COURTNEY WHITSON: No, I mean, we knew they were going to be physical, so it was just a matter of taking that into our own hands.

At the end of the day, just like Coach said, it's hard to overcome that deficit from the free-throw line. Just being smarter, fouls that we can control, yeah.

SAVANNAH WHEELER: I was going to say exactly the same thing pretty much. Physicality. Only thing you can do against a team like that is just match their physicality.

Q. Still a tremendous season as a Lady Raider. What has being part of this program meant just seconds after it's over?

COURTNEY WHITSON: I mean, this is the platform that you work for. I get to represent my faith. I get to represent my community. I get to represent that man.

To think this is going to be the last time I ever put on this jersey stings. It's been a long journey, but I'm thankful for it, and this just sets them up for next year to get where they



want to be.

All the players that came before this me laid the foundation, so it's been an amazing, blessed journey.

SAVANNAH WHEELER: Yeah, really just piggybacking off what Courtney said. There have been a lot of highs and a lot of lows. By golly, I'm thankful for those highs and lows, for sure.

It's definitely shaped me into who I am right now, and I just have been very fortunate and very blessed to be here and just to play with a great group of girls and play for a great group of coaches.

Hitting that portal was the best thing that's ever happened for me, and I don't regret any of that.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations on your season, and we really appreciate your time. Thank you.

We'll open up the floor for questions for Coach.

Q. Coach, obviously emotional moment right there. Can you just talk about what this group has meant to you this year? Obviously you've coached a long time, but what's made this group special?

RICK INSELL: I think you would have to live in our community to know that. Down here the three or four days that you've been here you wouldn't know that. Maybe you would know it if you seen some of those people that flew in on their planes and drove.

This group is so invested in our community, invested into our university, and then the university and our community has invested in them. It's just something special to see. You would have to be there to witness it.

Then, you know, we didn't have - I don't know, whatever they had today - 12,000, 15,000 fans there. Our fans are as radical as anybody's out there, as loud as anybody's out there.

Those kids right there, they'll be missed. Courtney has been with me five years, and Savannah now two years. It will be tough coming in in the mornings. I don't know that I ever came in in a morning I didn't see Savannah out there working. I don't know that somewhere during the day I didn't run through the gym that I didn't see Courtney working. They're two very special young ladies.

Q. There was a 31-16 foul discrepancy. They shot 37 free-throws. You all only shot 9.

RICK INSELL: You want me to get fined? Is that what you are searching for?

Q. No, sir.

RICK INSELL: You had three Final Four officials there. I've had that two or three times in my career. Maybe one time in college. Maybe one time in travel team ball. Very seldom do you see that.

I don't know that we've had maybe one player foul out this year. We had three players. Not tonight. I'm talking about one player before we got to this game. Three times.

So, you know, that kind of... How many did we have tonight? Three? So, you know.

There were some bright spots for me. I thought Jada Grannum come in and did a great job for us. I thought Ta'Mia did a good job. She had taken the ball to the hole. She hit some threes, missed two free-throws early. We've just been riding Jalynn Gregory's back and Savannah's back and Courtney's back and Nas' back all year long.

It's going to be tough playing, but anybody (indiscernible) us out there tonight, we'll be back. We have a good group coming around, and we have some good recruits. We'll be back.

Q. An atmosphere like this, the suddenness of a loss is kind of hard to put into words. What was your message to the team immediately after the game?

RICK INSELL: I'm just proud of them. Very proud. Don't let this define you. Don't let it define this year, define this team.

You know, I was really not concerned about the atmosphere bothering our players. I think you saw that early on. I mean, they were loud early on, but after we were up eight, missed a three, and that's just something that happens. Then Angel fell down. She wasn't running the floor. It wasn't like she was sprinting the floor. She's laying down there. Then they were able to throw over the top, and she got an easy layup. They hit a three after that, and then they were rolling.

They're a very talented basketball team. We knew coming in they were very talented. We knew if they decided to play, it was going to be tough for us to win.

Now, if they decide to play the rest of the year like they did the second half, they're going to be tough. I've watched them play a lot. I've watched a lot of film on them. That second half was about as good as I've seen them play this

year, to be honest with you.

If they decide to do that, they're going to have another chance to hang another flag up. They got good players. They got good coaching staff. They got what it takes.

But you have to have a little luck. You have to stay healthy to win a national championship.

Q. You touched on this a little bit earlier, but you do have a lot of players that have made the core of this team coming back next year. What excites you about where this program is headed and what you all have accomplished this year?

RICK INSELL: Well, I've said this all along, in the last ten years, maybe 15 years our program was one of the top-30 programs in the country. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. We're there every year, and we lack getting votes to be voted into the top ten or top 15.

Part of that is a fact that you look at the committee that you've got voting on this. Most of those guys are on the Power Five teams, so they're going to take care of themselves. It's not a secret.

The same thing holds true. I think you just saw what was going on with Greg Sankey. He is wanting to take the automatic qualifiers and throw them to the side. Where did that come from?

My president is on the executive committee for the NCAA, so I guess they'll probably address that part if they haven't already.

We got a pretty good game here. You look at what's happening in men's basketball and women's basketball. You've got some of those automatic qualifiers that are putting some of those teams out that really probably shouldn't even have been in the NCAA tournament, to be honest with you.

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