

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

LSU Tigers

Kim Mulkey

Flau'jae Johnson

Angel Reese

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Welcome back to Baton Rouge where we are set to speak with the LSU Lady Tigers. They are set for their Baton Rouge Regional game tomorrow against Middle Tennessee. Happy to be joined by Flau'jae Johnson and Angel Reese.

Q. What can you kind of take from yesterday's game and you specifically going into Middle Tennessee?

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, of course. I have to be better offensively for sure. I think defensively in rebounding I did a good job, but offensively my team needs more from me. So being able to just finish around the basket better going into the second game is going to be something that's important.

Q. Your relationship with Shaq. As I've watched you play throughout the year, I see you won't get the benefit of the calls a lot of times that maybe you should, I guess, and that's something that he dealt with. Is that a conversation you guys have had as far as keeping your composure, playing with patience, those kinds of things?

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, he just tells me all the time stay calm, stay poised. He always tells me like you know who you are, and you're not going to get a lot of things because of who you are. So just trying to stay confident and stay poised.

I have great teammates and coaches who still put confidence in me when I'm not making a lot of shots or I'm not getting the calls that I should deserve sometimes. So just not getting down, not getting emotional, and not letting



that affect my game.

Q. Flau'jae, you've had the task of really clamping down on some really great shooters this year. You have two to face tomorrow. What is it for you defensively to try to slow them down?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: I think just kind of putting all of that into this game, you know what I'm saying, everything I've learned. I've clamped down a lot of players. Some games I got scored on a lot more than I would like to admit.

But just taking the good and the bad and trying to figure out how to have a good defensive performance tomorrow, I think that's what it's going to be about, because Middle Tennessee, they can shoot. That's what we're going to be working on today.

Q. Flau'jae, Kim talked about yesterday maybe being an attention getter as far as commitment and focus and understanding that you could get beat. Have you all done any scout? So far does it seem to have set in, the messaging of focus?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Yeah, we definitely have done a scout. I said yesterday in the press conference that that was the first time all of us was on the court together in a long time, not just piecing it here, piecing it there. We really needed that wakeup call game.

We know that game should have went differently. We should have won by a lot more. You know what I'm saying, you need those games. Last year we played Hawaii the first game, and we didn't have as good a game as we should have.

I just think it's March -- March nerves, March jitters. We got that out. Now we've got to go do what we know how to do. Any team could have beat us yesterday with 20-plus turnovers.

ANGEL REESE: I agree.

Q. For either player, what did you learn from watching how Middle Tennessee handled yesterday's game,



especially with the comeback? I know their schedule is not like yours, but they have won 20 in a row and haven't lost since December 30th. How do you put that in perspective?

ANGEL REESE: They're a super disciplined team. They take advantage of matchups. They take advantage of turnovers. They take advantage of mess-ups. So understanding like we can't turn the ball over 24 times because they're going to maximize off of that.

They have a great team where everybody plays their role. They set great screens to set up a lot of great shots. You have to play for the whole shot clock. The last seconds, they will come up and make some shots, and we saw that yesterday. They were down 17 at a point, and you see how they could come back and just easily beat you.

Tomorrow we can't get a lead and go up and then take our foot off the pedal. So just being able to keep pushing, keep going through, because they are a good team. They have beat an SEC team this year. So they're a talented team.

Q. Hopeful to get a thought from both of you. I wanted to ask about Mikaylah. It's her freshman year. She scored the first points for you guys yesterday in her first ever NCAA Tournament game. How you guys as her teammates have seen her evolve and develop this year, just what stuck out to you most? And I guess how proud are you of how she's been able to handle the ebbs and flows of her freshman year?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Super proud. When she came in, I know just coming off my freshman year, I just wanted to prepare her as much as I could. But I'm just proud of her that she's just learning how to keep her poise and composure. I talk to her a lot about that, just going into sometimes coaching isn't going to be what you want it to be in the moment. You aren't going to be hitting shots. You've got to learn to affect the game in a lot of ways.

I think she's becoming a well rounded player every time she steps on the floor.

ANGEL REESE: Her confidence, as a freshman. Last year we had Flau'jae that was super confident, and now we have another freshman coming in super confident. These freshmen these days, they're killing it. I know I wasn't as confident like that as a freshman.

Being able to have somebody on the team that is willing to do whatever it takes to win. I mean, when her shots aren't going in, she's affecting the game differently. That's a difference from the beginning of the season until now. Her

maturity level, being able to understand you can't have a great game every game, we'd love to have that, but defensively she's also taken that in and taken accountability when she's not focused on her matchup or she's not defending the way she wants to defend or making shots.

So I think that's the maturity level of going into the tournament, like I think she's done a great job with that.

Q. Flau'jae talked about taking tough coaching. When you came here, you talked about that's one of the things you wanted. How has your relationship with Kim changed or evolved from what you thought it would be when you got here to what it is now? Flau'jae, the same thing for you.

ANGEL REESE: I knew what it was when I got here. I told her in my meeting, I want to be coached hard. I want to be pushed. I don't want you to make me feel like, quote, unquote, the best player. I want you to make me feel like I'm at the bottom. I don't want to feel good about anything.

In practice, I can't take a play off. Sometimes you see it at the next level. Like they'll let the vets, they'll let the big dogs take plays off, but I don't do that, and I can't do that in practice. She gets on me a lot about that, and expectations are super high. I think that will take me a long way, and I'll always remember that.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Same. I never won -- like when I was in high school, I never won like a championship or anything. I told Coach Mulkey that I just wanted to be a winner. I mean, we won my first year, so it's kind of like I was spoiled a little bit. But I want to be a winner. She knows how to win.

She has a lot of basketball knowledge, and I think I'm just getting better. The work I put in myself, and then just taking the gems that she gives me and kind of just incorporating it into what I do.

Q. To both players, both of you kind of spoke of this throughout the season, but obviously Aneesah had a part in that game where Poa said simply, She's a beast. When stuff like that happens, we just get behind her. In a game like that, survive and advance, how important is that in this type of atmosphere to have a player like that that you can count on in moments?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Yeah, it's big. Like Aneesah turn on real quick. She goes through spurts where she scores. It's not like she'll score this one and miss that. No, if she's going to hit, she's going to hit about eight in a row.

I got a lot of my assists off her yesterday, just throwing it in there and she's putting it up. So I try to hit her when she's hot. But that just goes to show her maturity.

She has a record right now, like 2,000 points and some other points. Oh, 1,000 rebounds. She's just that type of player where you can really count on her. She's very reliable and very consistent every game, so it's very big for us going into March to have that.

She's older, upperclassman. I think it's just that poise and that experience.

ANGEL REESE: Honestly, she's been a beast all year. I touched on this a lot. I feel like I overshadow her sometimes and just being able to get a lot of attention on myself, but she doesn't really get that attention she deserves. She works really hard every day in practice, she doesn't complain, and she just puts her head down and grinds every day.

You love a teammate that does that because, when I have an off night, you know she's going to step up. Or just give me the confidence to keep going and going and going because she is a vet. This was her first time last night playing in a tournament game, and you think she'd be nervous, but you wouldn't even be able to tell it was her first time.

Being able to have a teammate like that that pushes me and has gotten me better all year is something that's been great.

Q. Angel, tomorrow you're going up against a two-headed monster. You've got 6'5" Iullia Grabovskaia and 6'6" Anastasia Boldyreva. They have a combined 108 blocks on the season. What's the game plan going into that matchup, and how do you plan on getting around their defense that forces 14 1/2 turnovers per game, 5 blocks, and 7 steals?

ANGEL REESE: They have to go against Angel Reese, Aneesah Morrow, and Aalyah Del Rosario. So they have to work on that and figure that out first.

Secondly, we focus on our matchups of course in our film room. It's no different from any other day or any other night. It's going to be a team effort. It's not going to be just two matchups. We have great guards too. It's going to be a team focus. If they focus on two players, they're in trouble.

Q. The thing that's impressed me most about Flau'jae is, yes, they've asked her to do more defensively, but I think her athleticism and smoothness, for lack of a

better word, on the offensive end has really exceeded my expectations. Could you speak to her game and how it's evolving still.

ANGEL REESE: Yeah, like I said from freshman year to sophomore year, defensively usually you don't see that big jump, and she's taken that big jump because freshman year she had to guard a lot of top picks. I always tell her like you guarded Jordan Horston last year in the Tennessee game. She was one of the best players last year in the country. When she's playing against these girls, that's why it gives her that much confidence.

The smooth around the basket, I be like, how did that be going in? I go around looking at rebounds trying to find a way. She always puts on a show. Her and Aneesah be making some acrobatic shots, and I'm like let me just get a rebound and get back on defense.

Q. How about the one yesterday?

ANGEL REESE: I was like, yeah, I'll just get back on defense. Everything happened so fast. Yeah, that was smooth. That was smooth.

Q. I'm curious, this time of year, if you lose, it could be it's a very abrupt end to your season. I'm wondering, when you guys aren't in the building, if you're at each other's apartments or going to get something to eat, do you try to spend as much time together this time of year than maybe you would a month ago?

ANGEL REESE: I feel like it's kind of the same. We all don't live at the same apartment complex. Most of the girls live on campus. Me, Flau'jae, and Hailey don't live on campus, so it's kind of hard.

But we're with each other all day. I think it's good to get the break we need to get the space. We win this game, we're going to be with each other all week, and we're going to go from straight Albany to Cleveland. So I think some time away is okay.

We're with each other all the time. It's fun. It's a sisterhood. I don't have any sisters, so I feel like college is the best time ever, being able to just have a sisterhood and make these kind of memories with amazing girls from different kinds of places, from different experiences and backgrounds. I'll never, ever forget just being able to be in college, like I love it.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: I don't think you understand like we're together from August till April, like there's a couple months in between that, you know what I'm saying? We spend a lot of time on the court.

I don't know what people think college basketball is like, like we just practice for an hour and we're outside all day. No, we're together.

ANGEL REESE: We don't have a 24-hour span without seeing each other, at least one person. We leave here at 6:00, we're going to be back here tomorrow at 7:00, 7:00 a.m., so it's a grind.

THE MODERATOR: On that note, we appreciate your time, Flau'jae and Angel.

KIM MULKEY: A reporter for the "The Washington Post" has been doing the last several years, and the lengths he has gone to try to put a hit piece together. This reporter has been working on a story about me for two years.

After two years of trying to get me to sit with him for an interview, he contacts LSU on Tuesday as we were getting ready for the first round game of this tournament with more than a dozen questions, demanding a response by Thursday right before we're scheduled to tip-off. Are you kidding me?

This was a ridiculous deadline that LSU and I could not possibly meet, and the reporter knew it. It was just an attempt to prevent me from commenting and an attempt to distract us from this tournament. It ain't going to work, buddy.

Unfortunately, this is part of a pattern that goes back years. I told this reporter two years ago that I didn't appreciate the hit job he wrote on Brian Kelly, and that's why I wasn't going to do an interview with him.

After that, the reporter called two former college coaches of mine and left multiple messages that he was with me in Baton Rouge to get them to call him back, trying to trick these coaches into believing that I was working with "The Washington Post" on a story. When my former coaches spoke to him and found out that I wasn't talking with the reporter, they were just distraught, and they felt completely misled.

Former players have told me that "The Washington Post" has contacted them and offered to let them be anonymous in a story if they'll say negative things about me.

"The Washington Post" has called former disgruntled players to get negative quotes to include in their story. They're ignoring the 40-plus years of positive stories that people -- or they have heard from people about me.

But you see, reporters who give a megaphone to a

one-sided, embellished version of things aren't trying to tell the truth. They're trying to sell newspapers and feed the click machine. This is exactly why people don't trust journalists and the media anymore. It's these kinds of sleazy tactics and hatchet jobs that people are just tired of.

I'm fed up, and I'm not going to let "The Washington Post" attack this university, this awesome team of young women I have, or me without a fight. I've hired the best defamation law firm in the country, and I will sue "The Washington Post" if they publish a false story about me.

Not many people are in a position to hold these kinds of journalists accountable, but I am, and I'll do it.

That's all I'm going to say about this right now, and now I'm going to get back to talking about my basketball team and winning this game tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much. As you all know, you've been here regularly, Coach Mulkey doesn't usually make opening statements, so that's all on that topic. For questions on the game tomorrow against Middle Tennessee, we'll open the floor.

Q. Obviously Middle Tennessee's shooting and their guard play kind of got to Louisville late yesterday. How would you evaluate their guard play?

KIM MULKEY: Before I answer that question, let me say exactly what I think about Middle Tennessee's program. Rick Insell is a Hall of Fame coach. Rick Insell, I don't know how many years he's been there, but I'll guarantee you he's been a part of this. I would guarantee in the last 20 years he's beaten at least 25 to 35 Power 5 teams. 17 of those have been out of the SEC.

So it wasn't a surprise to me yesterday that they won. He's extremely good at what he does. His son's on his staff. He has one of my former All-Americans on his staff. Much, much respect to Coach Insell and his family. They have treated me good through the years. They have sat with me at my son's baseball game in Louisville when we were all working in the summer. I love the Insell family.

Now, to answer your question, you know they're going to shoot the three ball. They all shoot the three ball. So you're going to have to be very respectful of the three ball, but they also have size. They win. They win. December is the last time they've ever lost a game.

So they're very confident, they're very talented, they're very good. The stuff they run will be very difficult for us to defend.

Q. Just what kind of progress have you guys made as far as defending the perimeter? Obviously your defense has stepped up over the last couple months, but is it where you want it to be?

KIM MULKEY: Well, I don't think I'm ever satisfied. I think we're much improved. Each team we play is different. The scouting report defensively will be different. They get to the foul line a lot. They get to the foul line. They're pretty much up there in the country on free-throw percentage.

We know they're going to make threes. It doesn't matter how good we defend the three. They're going to make them. What we've got to do is we've got to do what we do best, and that's make them guard us too.

I think transition is an area that maybe we can push it and run some. They don't have much depth. We've been talked about all year about not having much depth. They don't either. So hopefully it will be a game that won't come down to people fouling out, and we just get out there and play.

Q. You mentioned Nina Davis, who's an assistant on Middle Tennessee's staff, someone I know you advocated for being on Coach Insell's staff. How have you seen her grow since she's joined that staff and you've kept that relationship with her?

KIM MULKEY: Absolutely. Nina comes to my house. Nina calls me. I love that child.

We talk about Aneesah Morrow being an undersized post player and how good she is. Nina was that good for me at Baylor. Nina was like a ballerina in the paint. You couldn't block her shot. You couldn't block her out. She figured out ways to get her shot off. While it might not have been the most beautiful shot, you couldn't stop her.

She and I just have this funny relationship. You all know the show 48 Hours, and so it either took place in New Orleans or it takes place in Memphis. So me being from Louisiana, her being from Memphis, we'd go to practice every day, and I'd say, What's up, 48? It was an inside joke between the two of us.

Nina is one of the few former players I have that got into coaching, and I love it. I wish more did. I have more managers that become college coaches than I do players. I don't know why that is, but I'm so grateful that Nina is in coaching, and what better person to learn from than the Insell family?

Q. Last night we talked about Angel Reese not having the day she wanted to have. She seems a bit fiery

now. What do you expect to see from her tomorrow in round 2?

KIM MULKEY: Well, I think she kept doing other things. When you're having an off night, you just don't shut down. Angel didn't shut down. She had almost 20 rebounds. Do something when your shot's not falling or you just seem to be in a funk on the offensive end, and she did.

But that game's over. It's survive and advance. Angel has been in situations before when she didn't play well, and she's always responded. So she wasn't the only one that looked a little shaky yesterday.

Tomorrow's a new day. Today is a new day.

Q. What did you see in that film? Anything that can help you going forward with the turnovers?

KIM MULKEY: Oh, Lord, I didn't go back and watch that. Middle Tennessee's too good for me to worry about what happened yesterday. No, we're watching Middle Tennessee as soon as that game was over. We don't even talk about that game. No, I don't want to go back and look at that.

Q. Their big's down low, how far has Aalyah come as far as being able to defend without fouling and stay in the game?

KIM MULKEY: She got the two quick fouls yesterday. Aalyah, she's just gotten so much better. Her confidence is good, but what Aalyah lacks she can't control, and that's playing time, right? The more playing time she gets as she gets older, the better she's going to get.

She's coming in spotting Angel, spotting Morrow, and just look at how much she's improved in spot play versus when she really, really will get a lot of time in the future.

Q. You just kind of mentioned we don't even look at what happened yesterday. Coaches talk all the time, this is truly survive and advance. What's the messaging of, hey, you want to play better, but we've got a really good opponent on Sunday? How do you balance that within the short turnaround?

KIM MULKEY: You kind of don't talk about yesterday. You talk about Middle Tennessee because we've got to focus our energy today because we won't be on the floor tomorrow with a 2:00 game. We have to do everything today in the film room, everything on the floor.

So you don't talk about what happened yesterday. You talk about what we have to do to be successful. They're

very attentive. It's kind of like you flush it.

Q. Middle Tennessee is a team that likes to use their sets offensively. When you have so many sets to go over in a short time frame, how do you sort of prioritize planning around that?

KIM MULKEY: I think we do the same thing. I noticed that in watching them. That's got to be an old school Rick and Kim like to control who's going to get that shot and not just let them do what a lot of programs do now, and that's just freelance and whoever gets the best shot, take it. To me, that's good coaching.

We're going to go over as many of them as we can. Obviously through the course of the game it will be difficult, but I'm hoping it will be difficult for them too because we're going to run a lot of sets.

Q. Is there anything you want people to know about your relationship with your players? In regards to your opening statement.

KIM MULKEY: I told you I wasn't going to talk about that again.

Q. Anything about your current relationship with your players?

KIM MULKEY: You'd better ask them. I think they love me.

THE MODERATOR: Once again, LSU and Middle Tennessee 2:00 tomorrow here in Baton Rouge.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports