

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Middle Tennessee vs Louisville

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Pete Maravich Assembly Center

Louisville Cardinals

Olivia Cochran

Merissah Russell

Media Conference



see a 6, and they see an 11. What they may not look at is you're facing a team that hasn't lost yet in 2024. As you scout them, what is it you see about this year's Middle Tennessee team that you'll face tomorrow?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Like Merissah said earlier, they're an effort team. They whipped our butts last year mentally, physically, emotionally. This year, like we said, we've just got to know us. We've got to be Louisville.

We haven't been playing with effort like we should have in a couple games we lost this year. And a game last year that we lost against them, we didn't have no effort. We've got to go in with a fight. We've got to go in with a chip on our shoulder and show them that we are tough and we're willing to work hard and stuff like that.

Q. Obviously everyone wants to play at home in the first two rounds, but when you saw you were getting sent here and playing on the home court of the reigning National Champions, was that kind of interesting in a way? Obviously playing them in the first round, but just to be here where they play, you see the banners and everything, what was that reaction like?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Last year we went to Texas as well. We didn't get to host. Like I mentioned before, we're four-year players, so we've had an opportunity to host our first two years -- or our second year, because there was a COVID tournament.

It's amazing. We're very prepared. Like I mentioned before, we're a very battle tested team. We have great transfers that have played in multiple tournaments.

It's really cool to play against the defending National Champions. If we win against Middle Tennessee and being on their court, it's awesome. It's awesome for women's basketball. It's awesome to get that exposure.

I'm Canadian, so I don't really know America all that much. It's great to travel the country and just see. We went and had some jambalaya last night. I've only ever seen that in movies, so that was amazing. And some crawfish etoufee,

OLIVIA COCHRAN: It's been great dealing with new people from new teams, just seeing how we can all be joined as one and different personalities mixing together. It's been awesome. On the court and off the court, I can't complain at all.

I feel like the experience they're bringing from their other schools is helping me grow as a leader and as a player as well because there's some things I never knew. So getting that knowledge from them is helping me grow as well as a player.

THE MODERATOR: Merissah, obviously with LSU being here, the focus has been eight SEC teams, but there's eight ACC teams as well. How do you think going through that gauntlet for you all has helped you prepare to start the new season here with the tournament?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Sure. I think our conference is probably one of the best in the country, if not the best. You have no idea what you're going to get every game in and out. We have to prepare for every game in the ACC Conference. We lost a couple of tough ones in our conference as well to Virginia, Syracuse, who came out really strong this year.

We're really battle tested because of our conference and their conference play. I'm just really excited. We have a great team tomorrow to play. It's really tested us, and we feel prepared.

THE MODERATOR: You commented on Middle Tennessee. Olivia, let me ask you, you're a team, everybody likes to look at brackets and seedings. They



I don't know what that is but --

OLIVIA COCHRAN: It was good too.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: It was awesome. Just to try new things in the culture and travel and support the women's game. It's amazing. I'm excited to get playing.

Q. You mentioned the COVID tournament. It seems like since the pandemic, women's basketball has just taken off in terms of TV ratings and popularity and ticket sales and all that stuff. It's got to be an exciting time to be a part of the game. What do you think it is? What do you think is the reason for this rapid growth we've seen the last two, three years?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: For sure. I think that it's just social media help in more coverage of the sport. We have great faces of the game in Caitlin Clark, even Angel Reese, since we're here at LSU. It's great for women's basketball. We have great names, great faces, and we have the skill.

I think we've had the skill forever. We've had great teams at U of L, with Myisha Hines-Allen, Angel McCoughtry. We deserve that coverage, and we've shown that.

It's just great now that we have that social media platform, like I said, more coverage of the game. It's just exciting.

I remember when I was younger, I wanted to be the next Breanna Stewart because I was able to watch. Now there's so many more, and even in Canada we're covering more of our games so that young Canadian girls and young Canadian boys can watch as well.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I have nothing to add. She said everything. She said the right thing.

Q. You played with Hailey for three seasons -- you knew it was coming. I figured I'd ease into it. Have you spoken to her? When you heard that you all were going to LSU's bracket, I'm sure you saw on social media her reaction for you facing a former teammate. What is it going to be like if you do end up facing her on Sunday?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I actually haven't spoken to her since we landed here. Like I told the team, it's a business trip, right? We're really excited. Obviously we're excited to play them.

We didn't get to choose the bracket that we play in, but we're here to play. Obviously we have a great game tomorrow against Middle Tennessee. We'll play our best and hopefully get the winner of the LSU game. We're

excited. I'm really excited to see her.

We have a really great team this year, probably one of my favorites, if not the best team. Great people, great teammates. We've had highs and lows this season, but we've always had each other's backs, and that was something we didn't have last year on that team.

I'm excited. Like I said, it's a little bit interesting playing an old teammate. Obviously we're a little bit closer to her. We were in her same class. I have so much faith in this team, and we're a better team than we were last year. So I'm really excited. We have new leadership in me, O. So, yeah, we look good.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I'm definitely excited. Just like the former question about playing the defending National Champions, that's a goal on my list. I'm super excited. I have total confidence in my teammates that we're going to take care of business tomorrow. Hopefully we can go to Sunday and play.

I mean, never had no hate/love relationship with Hailey. Love her to death. Wish her the best. Glad she's having success with her new team and we're having success.

This is basketball. It's about moving on and bettering yourself. Happy she's doing that. We're going to do the same for ourselves.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: And yes, we did see the post on social media, her reaction, yes, to answer your question.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: We did see it. We're going to see what's going to happen.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: We're excited. We're excited for this tournament. We're excited to be in this bracket for sure.

Q. I was wondering, when you have a several year relationship with a prominent teammate and they leave, a lot of those are lifetime relationships anyway. Has there been much contact since she left, or will this be the first time you've talked to her in a long time or what?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: I was her roommate for three years, so I talk to her almost every week. It's different. Obviously we're busy. We're on two different teams, it's college basketball. I don't even talk to my mom that much sometimes.

We still talk. We're still friends. But at the end of the day, like I said, this is a business trip. If we win this game,

hopefully we want to win this game against Middle Tennessee, we get to play them. We're excited for the matchup. Like you said, it's a lifelong relationship.

I consider her a really great friend of mine, just as much as I consider Emily Engstler or Dana Evans a friend of mine and a dear sister. I'm excited for how this is going to turn out and how we're going to play tomorrow.

But like I said, tomorrow is a great game. We're playing a great team. Like you said before, it's a 6-11 matchup, but these rankings go out the door when it's March. You have to pay attention to the teams in front of you and put that story line behind us and focus on winning the first game.

Q. Little bit of off the wall question here, before every game, everyone watching the stadium on TV, they see you get introduced, and you get to the end of the line, and there's No. 23, and you have a little routine with Alexia.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Yes.

Q. How does someone -- what are the qualifications for that role that she has? Was it just a fun, goofy thing that you do, or is there actually like an element to it that you take seriously about it that it kind of puts you in a game mode or whatever?

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Actually, that's a great question. It's funny because I was that role for three years, and then Lex took over. I think it's just kind of the person who wants to do it. It's part of the culture of basketball, and I don't think I ever watched a game where there was no handshake or anything like that. Just the culture, but you get to have it personalized with your teammate.

I know that means a really big deal to Lex as well, just being part of the game and sending you off to, I would say, war, battle, whatever. Just to get you a little light hearted into going into the game.

I know Olivia is pretty simple, had hers for three years.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: I'm very superstitious. I just try to keep stuff simple. I'll be already in the mode to play. That's just for them. That's for me to get out my comfort zone and stuff like that. So I just do it because they want me to.

But I have fun with them. They make me laugh. They give me joy before the game. So I'm excited already, so the handshake is just a plus.

Q. Both of you all being veterans last year coming up

short to the Final Four, how do you use that experience from last year as you get ready to make this tournament run?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Definitely just keeping one foot in front of the other. Like I've been telling some of my teammates because some of them, it's their first tournament.

I'm off of social media right now because I can't like picture like everybody talking about the drama and stuff like that. That's what I try to tell somebody. I'm like, we don't need to focus on that. We just need to focus on getting ourselves better and helping each other grow and stuff like that.

So, yeah, I mean, it's fun. I told them, like when we went to the Final Four, it's fun. You get more stuff every event you go. You get more and more stuff. So the farther we get, the more we get. So I was telling them, y'all have just got to keep one foot in front of the other and stay humble and trust each other and play for each other.

And trust the coaching staff because they have our backs as well and they want us to succeed because they can't go out there and play for us. So play for each other and have fun.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: Piggy-backing off of that, having a great coaching staff, a veteran coaching staff as well in Coach Walz, he knows exactly what he's doing. It's not an if he's right, or I don't know if he's right. It's just doing what he says, and like Olivia said, taking it one step at a time. Every game is important. You win or you go home. You can't come and overlook a team ever at any stage.

Like I said, the rankings are the rankings just for the matchup, but we played a Drake team last year, a 5-12 game, and they were not a 12 seed, and they almost sent us home in the first round. You have to show up at every game, and that's basically our advice we tell our teammates.

It's funny because we were in the locker room and realized that Jayda Curry have never been in the tournament before. She was in awe of everything. Oh, my God, she hasn't been here before. It's like me and O, sitting here like let's start practice. Let her have her moment of just I made this, you know what I mean?

She's a great player, and we have great players like Kiki Jefferson and Sydney Taylor who have had their bouts of tournament. It's cool we're all together right now and taking in that moment, and we get to appreciate what we've gone through the last four years.



Because it's kind of a given Louisville women's basketball is going to make it to the tournament, it's just a matter of how far we get. And these girls are just so appreciative we made it to the first round. Okay, we got here. Now let's lock in here and let's keep going, you know what I mean?

OLIVIA COCHRAN: Got to keep dancing, come on. Stay focused.

MERISSAH RUSSELL: We just explain to our teammates, obviously there's a lot of stuff on social media we don't need to pay attention to. We're really focused on what our goal is here, and like I said, it's a business trip.

OLIVIA COCHRAN: For sure.

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