

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

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

LSU Tigers

Kim Mulkey

Angel Reese

Flau'Jae Johnson

Media Conference

LSU 83, Middle Tennessee 56

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by head Coach Kim Mulkey and Flau'Jae Johnson and Angel Reese. Questions for players, please.

Q. Flau'Jae, I guess for both of y'all, I don't think you had a steal in the first half, and you come out four steals in the first four minutes. What changed defensively for you all, and what allowed you all to go on that run?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Hailey. I told Hailey we have to cut the head off the snake, and she really took that challenge on because their point guard, she's little, but she's mighty, and she makes things happen for them, and she breaks down defenses.

So Hailey gave us the opportunity to be able to get in some passing lanes, for the bigs to be able to work their mojo. That's all Hailey Van Lith right there.

Q. Angel, can I just talk about Flau'Jae. I know you have talked about this all season, but just her ability to not only ignite the crowd but the bench and the team as well. Obviously a team effort, but just the job she did today...

ANGEL REESE: It comes from the defensive end. I think she's done a great job to transition from her freshman to sophomore year and taking that on. She usually guards the best player on the team. Tonight the point guard was that. She took accountability and just being able to get down and give us a lot of energy.



Like she said in the locker room, cut the head off the snake, and that was the point guard. Just being able to have a leadership from a sophomore when I might not be having my best game or Hailey might not be having her best game, but having leadership also from our younger players is great.

Q. Angel, for you, I think it was 4:21 in the third quarter, Flau'Jae was at the free-throw line, and I saw Kim yell to get your attention. She just mouthed to you, "I need you." Just that moment, what did you perceive the message to be, and how did you sort of implement that for the remainder of the game?

ANGEL REESE: I didn't want to let my team down. I think we were down at that point, and of course, when anybody tells me that they need me, I want to be there and do whatever it takes to win.

I had another off night scoring, but I was just doing whatever I could to just help the team, getting steals, getting in passing lanes, and helping my point guard.

Like I said, I didn't want to let my team down. I didn't want this to be my last game being here in the PMAC. So I did whatever it takes to win. And me and Coach have that kind of relationship where she can get on me and talk to me, like, I need you, and give me that encouragement that I need.

Q. We'll start with Angel. Just the idea of this being a 40-minute game and understanding that Coach talked about it yesterday, not exactly the deepest benches on either side, so if you could get them in foul trouble, you could get the outcome you wanted.

ANGEL REESE: We knew Middle Tennessee was going to be a team that played for 40 minutes. We saw when they played Louisville, and they were down 18 and came back and won that game. So we knew we were going to have to fight. Everybody was going to have to suck it up and get down and do whatever it takes to win. I think we did that.



We had a lot of help also from the bench and being able to have Poa sub in and start that second half, and Hailey still come in. It was the different rotations that we had. You never know whose game or whose night it's going to be. Being able to have players that step up off the bench was key for us tonight and then being able to get them in foul trouble.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Yeah, same. We just had energy. I mean, I feel like everybody felt that shift in the energy going into halftime. I was, like, my stomach was bubbling. I say, I ain't going home. I ain't got nothing to do - you know what I'm saying? - until the summer, uh-uh.

I want to be in New York, simple.

Q. Y'all were down 41-32 at the start of the third quarter and then y'all hit them with a blitz. What exactly happened, and how did you all flip the switch?

ANGEL REESE: Defense.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: We got steals.

ANGEL REESE: That defense. That defense. Defense. Offensively it wasn't really an issue. It hasn't been an issue for us because we know we can score the ball. Defense.

No. 4, I told Savannah after the game, she's a great player. She can score at all levels. Just being able to guard her and have to guard her and give her as much hell as we could. I mean, she took great shots, and she made a lot of tough baskets.

That was one of the tougher guards that I've seen. I think our guards did a great job trying to just keep her composed as much as we can. But you got to give kudos to her, No. 4, she's a great player.

Q. Flau'Jae, what did you think you knew when you came here, and what do you think you know now that has helped your game and helped you be a better teammate and contributor to this team?

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Coming into college? Oh, I knew nothing. I thought I knew something. Then I hit them going up and down with them college girls, and I say, Oh, no, I got to slow it down.

My freshman year, me and Coach Starkey, I never missed a day of film with him, where he just taught me so much. Some point throughout this year it just clicked: Oh, that's what I'm supposed to do. You know, just listening to scouting report.

I feel like, you know, when you kind of know what the player going to do, you can make them do whatever. I kind of think defensively from an offensive standpoint, what would I do? You know what I'm saying?

Then I use that with the scouting report, listen to what he says because Coach Starkey is brilliant with scouting report. I just try to learn anything I can. Suck all the juice from him because he knows a lot.

Q. Angel, in that rally you kicked it to Poa and she found Mikaylah in the corner and the place went nuts. Just her poise and needing her buckets and getting her going in the postseason.

ANGEL REESE: As a freshman, as I said, this is her second game in the NCAA tournament. I know nerves are still high for her. The crowd was going crazy, and I know trying to get it to my teammates as much as I can. I love getting assists. I try to lead the team in assists as best as I can.

And I told her, one time I kicked it to her, and I think she did a one (indiscernible) step-back, and I said I don't think I got the assist there.

I'm happy for Mikaylah and her confidence and being able to hit shots. But also on the defensive end, No. 15 was going off in the first half and I think she contained her in the second half. I don't think she let her score in the second half. Maybe once.

Being able to have her guard and being able to play both ends of the floor is something that's important for her.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Yes.

Q. (Off microphone).

ANGEL REESE: She's super aggressive. She plays hard all 40 minutes, even when her shots aren't going in. Defensively we know what we're going to get from Aneesah and rebounding from Aneesah, and she just makes tough shots on offense.

I mean, she's a matchup nightmare. Having to guard her in practice is tough. I love having her on my team, and wouldn't want to play against her because of everything she brings to the table when it comes to rebounding and make shots and her versatility as well. We like to try to go through Aneesah as much as we can, and she brings us a lot of confidence and energy.

Q. 'Poise' is a word that not just you two but a lot of



people have used inside that locker room. Can you walk us through some of the conversations during the time-outs, in the phase when they're making runs and how you have seen this team grow over the course of the year, just with that word 'poise'?

ANGEL REESE: Sometimes we can get into the heat of a moment, and I can yell at Flau'Jae, like, Flau'Jae. Or she'll yell at me. Flau'Jae, it's the way you say it.

Being able to hold each other accountable is something I love about this team. Nobody takes it personal. Just being able to get on each other and being able to correct each other and even if it's tough player coaching, we will come on the sideline and say, That was my bad for saying it like that. But you know what I mean?

I think that's something that's different from our team. We're able to talk to each other and get on each other and not take it personal, which is cool.

Q. We know Flau'Jae has nothing to do until the summer, but how important was it for you to advance and keep going here?

ANGEL REESE: It's fun. I couldn't hear at one point at PMAC. I didn't hear the play calls. I couldn't hear what was going on. It was so much fun. I love playing here at LSU and everything going on. It was so much fun.

Now to be able to advance in my second year here, it's just amazing. I wish we could take this crowd and bring it everywhere we go, but I know they're going to come to Albany, and I hope to see everybody in Albany.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time.

FLAU'JAE JOHNSON: Go stream my new single "It Ain't My Fault."

THE MODERATOR: Now we'll address post-game questions for Coach Mulkey.

Q. Obviously that moment right there, but towards the end of the game, can you just talk about the love for this team that you have, how special this group is.

KIM MULKEY: I coach a very shy team. They're very passive. I have to really get them going. No, they're fun. They're fun. Even when they're frustrated, they're fun. They're ballers. I'm blessed. I'm happy for them. I'm happy for LSU.

Let me say this. There's so many times people take getting to a Sweet 16 for granted. Do you know how many

coaches had probably never done that in their career? I've always, always acknowledged that it's hard to do.

I thought our fans were outstanding today. They showed up at -- what time did we play the other day? 3 o'clock and then today at 2 o'clock.

Yeah, those kids keep me young.

Q. Obviously not the start that you guys wanted today. Just wanted to ask externally if you guys felt like you maybe were distracted a touch and just talk about how your team was able to just weather that early start.

KIM MULKEY: No. Listen, man, we're not going to let one sleazy reporter distract us from what we're trying to do. Absolutely not. My kids didn't even know I said that yesterday. That team is not involved in this. They were in shock when they saw all that on the internet. I don't take that stuff to my team.

Was that the question, or did you have a second part?

Q. Just how they weathered that storm. I know the first half didn't go the way you wanted it to.

KIM MULKEY: Why don't we give credit to the other team? That's a Hall-of-Fame coach. Those kids haven't lost a game since the end of December. That's a good team, well-coached. They run their stuff. They reverse the ball. They make you defend for 30 seconds.

As I told you in the press conference before we played them, do you know how many Power Five teams that man has beaten? 17, 19 in the SEC alone. I give credit to the opponent.

Q. It looked like early on the size inside for MTSU was working for them, and eventually obviously Boldyreva fouled out before the end of the third quarter, and you were physical and aggressive, continuing to pound it inside. Can you just give us some insight into what worked in that way?

KIM MULKEY: Well, size matters, but I also think it doesn't matter. I'll take the smallest, little point guard you got if they got quickness. But in certain positions size matters. It makes you alter your shot. Angel missed some break-away layups. That had nothing to do with size inside, but she kept battling.

I think at half Angel didn't even have an offensive board. I thought it was very obvious that they use their fouls. They're physical. They use their fouls, and we took advantage of it.

I thought our energy, I thought our aggressiveness, I thought our effort in the second half wore them down. Even when they got good looks, they didn't make them. At the end of the third quarter, if I remember, I think they only had one three, and I think we just picked up our effort a lot more in the third and fourth quarter.

Q. How did you feel about y'all's team only having one turnover in the second half?

KIM MULKEY: I feel good. We only had seven for the game. Looked a little bit different than the other night, didn't it? The other day...

Q. Another question. How did you feel about Hailey's defensive effort despite only shooting 1 for 5?

KIM MULKEY: I was very proud of Hailey today. She doesn't start the second half, for no other reason other than a coach's decision. And that child worked her rear-end off in the second half defensively. As Flau'Jae said, she set the tone for us to pick our energy up on the defensive end.

She's just trying to do something in her career before college ends for her, and that's to try to win a championship. I just told her how unselfish she was today to let me start Poa. She didn't ask why. She didn't pout. She went out there and did her job.

Q. Back to the defense. You held them to eight field goals in the second half. Two total threes. The total effort, I guess, you were speaking about Hailey, but Flau'Jae and her ability to get up and down the court, is that what you're most proud of and feel like your team has a chance to go deep because of?

KIM MULKEY: I thought we picked up pushing the ball. We were running in transition at all positions in the second half. What we did better defensively is we helped each other. We helped each other. And it started with our post players helping Poa, helping Hailey when that young lady would come off the screens at the top. I mean, it's just hard to guard somebody that really makes them flow and makes them go.

I thought late in the shot clock they did exactly what they've been taught to do, and that's you switch anything under 10 seconds on the shot-clock, you'll hear us holler, "Hot." That's letting them know we switch at all positions on ball screens.

I think also in the second half we rebounded better. Those guys were kicking our rear on the boards early, and honestly, that wasn't in the scouting report. That was kind

of a shock that we were getting out-rebounded or those things were happening in the first half.

Q. How important was the pitch-ahead passes that you were able to get to get your transition offense going or at least get into y'all's offense early to get opportunities?

KIM MULKEY: At halftime we told them we need to get some transition buckets, and let's go. If you get a rebound, Mikayla, if you get a rebound, Flau'Jae, take off. Everybody run.

I think we got some cherry-picking there. I think Angel was down there one time. We got some breaks to get it started like that. But then it just kind of snowballed and we just started running and going.

I think they got in foul trouble. I can't remember when we got into the bonus, but obviously we were telling them, Why settle? Take it right down their throats.

Q. Flau'Jae hit some big-time shots, but what did you see from her tonight?

KIM MULKEY: I've seen it in Flau'Jae this last half of the season. That kid's confidence is unbelievable right now. It's not just one-dimensional. She's doing so many good things out there on the floor.

One, she's taking care of the ball. Two, she knows when to drive, when to shoot the shot from the perimeter. Other than today, she's most of the time being asked to guard the better perimeter player. I think Scott asked it earlier. She's just starting to learn this game at all aspects, and it's just fun to watch her.

She'll get in that time-out now. It's so funny. I don't even have to talk anymore. She wants to draw this up, and then she wants to say this, and Angel has her 2 cents. Every now and then I get to chime in.

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