

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Tennessee vs Virginia Tech

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

Virginia Tech Hokies

Kenny Brooks

Elizabeth Kitley

Taylor Soule

Kayana Traylor

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Virginia Tech - 73, Tennessee - 64

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

KENNY BROOKS: Very gratifying win. I think the biggest thing I can take away from this game is that I'm so happy for these kids. Proud is -- we're always going to be proud of 'em, but I'm so happy for 'em. All their stories are different, but Liz and I talk quite a bit and this time last year she just wanted to get to this point and we watched NC State get here. We talked about getting to this level. Now we're ACC champions and now we're going to the Elite 8, and so, so happy for her and the hard work she put in.

Kayana Traylor, she came here for this reason. Sacrificed so much. She was an All Big Ten performer, wanted to come here because she wanted to be a part of a winning program, and she's helped elevate us to this level. Taylor Soule's situation is more recent. Sacrificed a lot. She was an All ACC performer, still is, but she sacrificed a lot of her points and stuff to come here and win games like this.

So very happy. For us to go out and win and beat a storied program like Tennessee for the second time this year, it just validates who we are and what we've been able to do this year. These kids are resilient, and I love their character because they don't need things to motivate them, but they also are very knowledgeable about things. I think



they all saw the article that was on ESPN, is this the next chapter of Tennessee and UConn. They didn't have to say a whole lot, but it just really motivated them and they understand that they belong as well.

We might not have as much history as those programs, but these kids are helping to build our history with our program. So very happy for everyone involved. I thought they played well. It got a little dicey, but we did a tremendous job.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Is Georgia not here because she's shooting more threes on the on the floor? To coach's point, no Tennessee, UConn's out, Stanford fell early, Notre Dame fell. Do the three of you feel like this is a new chapter in women's basketball and a new time?

KAYANA TRAYLOR: In general, this year there's been a discussion about parity in women's basketball, even on the men's side. So, yeah, I definitely think, regardless of who we play, like, they're going to be good. Whoever is left is good. They're here for a reason. So, yeah.

Q. Taylor, this question is for you. They cut it to one and they were -- they had the press going. What happened after that in terms of how you guys responded? How do you feel about how you responded after that?

TAYLOR SOULE: I think, obviously, made some mistakes and you're never going to play a perfect game, and so cleaning those things up for next game. But I'm just proud of us for never giving up. Georgia did a great job breaking the press, but honestly, it was a team effort. We never got down on ourselves. We knew it was just next play. Once we got the ball across the floor just executing on offense. So I'm proud of the team.

Q. Career high for Georgia today. Curious, she's had, I think, 20-plus points in the last five or six games. Did you guys notice a turning point for her at all during this season? Like, when did this -- when did you realize she was capable of this and like, when did she



realize she was capable of this?

ELIZABETH KITLEY: I think we've all known that she was -- she's been doing crazy stuff in practice since we've been here in the summer. But I think since we have started on our win streak, she's just really gotten the confidence also, and I think she's realized that the ball is in good hands when it's with her, and I think that we put her in situations a lot of times where she has to make a play. She's executed in those critical times, and I think that's given her a lot of confidence. But we all just feel that way about her and I think that she knows that now and she's feeling good about it.

Q. Since you've been at Virginia Tech the longest, what does it feel to -- or how does it feel to be able to -- be able to say you were the first team to get Virginia Tech to an Elite 8? Because they have been to the Sweet 16 before, but this is obviously new chapter, and I'm sure you have bigger goals beyond just the Elite 8. But just to know that you've been part of that history.

ELIZABETH KITLEY: Yeah. It means everything to me. I'm just so happy that I landed at such an amazing spot where we did exactly what we wanted to. And it hasn't been easy and it's taken Coach Brooks like a few years, but what he's done with the program and the amount of time is incredible. For us to get to the farthest point in program history is amazing and I think we all just love the program so much and we're so happy that we get to be a part of it. Hokie Nation has been amazing also. So it's cool to do it for them because they're having just as much fun as us, it seems.

Q. Curious, Elizabeth went out with two fouls with like seven minutes left in the first half. You guys were up four. You closed that half big. You're up 13 at the break. What did you guys do in that last seven minutes of the first half without one of your standout players to really close the door there and bring momentum into the second half?

KAYANA TRAYLOR: I think it just goes to show how we played for each other, regardless of if somebody is out with foul trouble or just having a bad night or whatever. I think what makes us as good as we are is that anybody can pick that up, whether it's like a group effort or individually. So, yeah.

Q. You guys scored the first nine points of the game and led the rest of the way. What did you like about how you played offensively and defensively in the first half to take control of that game?

TAYLOR SOULE: Offensively, I think I liked our ability to be aggressive and not really let them push us off our spot. That's kind of been a highlight that we've been talking about throughout the season.

I think defensively we did a really good job of playing team defense. They have really great athletes, so we knew it wasn't going to just be one-on-one defense that was going to get the job done. So people did a great job. We had smaller guards fighting out in the post. We had Liz, Dee Mo, trying to help out, and so I'm proud of the team for understanding the scout. We have great scouts and I'm proud of us for executing.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. I'm curious, what about that press gave you guys trouble for a bit? And what did you do to kind of fight your way through that?

KENNY BROOKS: They're long and they're athletic. Kellie does a really good job. She can put out a lot of different lineups, different types of lineups. She can put out a smaller, quicker lineup. She can put out a longer, more athletic lineup. She can put out just a big lineup. They threw us off a little bit. We knew it was desperation time for them. They got down, I think, by as much as 18, and we knew they were going to come after us.

I think we got a little bit too reliant on Georgia to break the press and we were kind of standing around and watching and hoping that she was going to do it herself. It kind of took its toll on us for a little bit, for a little stretch. But I thought we did a really good job. We mixed up the press breaks. We kind of took her off so that we could get the ball back to her when they weren't pressuring her as much.

But she did a phenomenal job. We got into the bonus and she did a phenomenal job of creating fouls and getting to the free-throw line and stepping up and knocking 'em down. And that took momentum away from them, from their pressure. Then we also hit some timely shots to really keep them at bay. But it was a really good press. It's a good precursor to what we're going to see on Monday. And we're probably getting pressed right now. Ohio State is probably going to press us right now. But we understand it's going to be that type of game.

Q. That was going to be my follow-up question. You'll see the press again. How do you balance how you guys run your press break things with the short rotation? Because obviously a team that's going to press you a lot when you're not playing a lot of people is going to wear people down.

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, I think it will, but I think all that matters is how you handle it, if we're able to beat the pressure and make 'em pay for it. I think too many times they pressure you, and you just beat it and then set up your offense, then they -- that's a moral victory for them as well.

So we got to be aggressive. We got to be smart, but be aggressive, get downhill, break the pressure, and get some easy opportunities, and I think that that will kind of ease it up a little bit. But they have been doing it all year long. They're really good at it. They hit a snag this year, but they regrouped and I thought their -- I didn't see their game today. I saw some bits and pieces of it. But we know it's going to be an issue.

Q. It looked like your defensive game plan was to sort of pack it in a little bit and see if they could shoot 50 percent on threes again. Was that kind of the idea, to see if they could actually beat you from the outside?

KENNY BROOKS: Man, they have two WNBA stars on both ends. It's kind of like -- I'm a big fan of Jurassic Park and one of my favorite things was happening when the raptor -- there was one raptor here and it got the attention of everybody and then another raptor came from the other side and they were hunting. That's kind of the way they are. They're two dynamic athletes that you focus too much attention on one and then the other one gets going.

But we really wanted to make them work. We wanted to take away their right as much as we could, crowd them, and don't give them space. I thought we did a good job in transition other than the couple of the steals, but we didn't let them get going in space. When they get going in space, they're just too hard to guard. We wanted to kind of crowd them and if they spun, we were kind of there to dig at 'em. And I thought we did a really good job. They're going to make some shots, but I thought we made them take some tough shots. But they both turned the ball over at a high clip, one had six and one had seven. And so our mission was accomplished just by crowding them and making it tough for 'em.

Q. I just curious where you feel like you've seen the biggest growth in Georgia, either since she first got to campus or even just in this incredible stretch, where she's really looked like Steph Curry out there?

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah. No, Georgia, when she walked on campus, we knew we stole one. I was telling anybody that would listen. And Hailey Van Lith is a great player. Deja Kelly is a great player. The reason I say them is because they were the two kids coming into our league in

the same class. They were McDonald's All-Americans. And I just kept thinking Georgia is just as good.

And what I saw with Georgia -- Georgia took a little bit of a step back beginning of last year and the beginning of this year because when you incorporate transfers, you really don't have a rhythm with your team, and she took a step back because she wanted to facilitate for them. She wanted to make them comfortable, and in doing so, she kind of forgot about herself.

She and I would talk, and I would tell her, I said, You're the -- one of the things I tell her now is, You're the best player on the floor. Go act like it. Go prove it. Go prove it. And I've often said that Liz is probably our best player, but Georgia's our most important. And she understands that. She's only doing -- like Liz said, she's only doing now what we see all the time. When the kids have to go out and guard her, they really tighten up their shoestrings because they know that there's something that can happen.

But she's phenomenal. She's as good as anybody in the country, in my opinion. She's playing with the utmost confidence and she's been playing like this ever since we really started this stretch, and she's a big reason why we are here.

Q. First of all, now I want to know how many other Jurassic Park analogies you have up your sleeve.

KENNY BROOKS: That's my movie. All of 'em. All of 'em.

Q. This is uncharted waters for your program. You talked the other day about being so deeply embedded in Virginia, the state, in basketball there. I'm just curious, as you're going through this, as a coach, who are you talking to getting advice from? Like, this is uncharted waters for you too. Who are you kind of leaning on?

KENNY BROOKS: I don't know if I get advice from him. I talk to him quite a bit, but I think I would be crazy if I'm taking advice from Jeff Walz, but... (laughing.)

But I talk to him. I talk to him. When you talk to Jeff, you have to -- you listen to everything he says, but you have to only believe probably about 25 percent of it. But, no, he's good. As a matter of fact, we had a group text starting yesterday. He started it, and it had Katie Meier in it and Niele Ivey and myself, and we were talking about going representing for the ACC. And Wes Moore is great to me, from NC State. Obviously, he's been through this situation. He was here, won an ACC championships, and got to the Elite 8.

But we battle, we're fierce competitors, but we're also pulling for each other when we're not playing against each other. It's kind of like a brotherhood, a sisterhood. It's like a family, an ACC family. So we talk quite a bit and we bounce stuff off of each other. Don't tell Jeff I said that.

Q. This is all in the transcript.

KENNY BROOKS: Oh, dang it. I don't know Jeff can read, anyway. (Laughing.)

THE MODERATOR: There's video too.

KENNY BROOKS: Oh, okay. I love Jeff.

Q. You are going to take your team to a place where they haven't been before. Is there anything you don't know about your team yet? Will it expose anything that you don't already know about your team?

KENNY BROOKS: No. I think the way we built this team we built it on relationships. I know these kids. We are, we're going to a spot that we've never been before. But their resiliency, their toughness, their competitive drive, their talent kind of supercedes anything being nervous. They came out -- if they were going to be nervous, tonight was a great opportunity for them to be nervous, and they weren't.

We had a tremendous day of practice two days ago when we first got here. And I was joking, I said, I wish the game was that day because they were just -- they were feeling it. They were good, they were locked in, they were executing, they were doing the things they were supposed to be doing. But they're really connected, they're really connected. And so I don't think the moment will be too big for them at all. I just think that, okay, we're going to go out and we're going to win. We know we're playing against Ohio State, who is a fantastic basketball team, but I don't think we'll lose -- win or lose because the moment is too big.

They just -- they understand the assignment. They go out, they execute, as Traylor said. They just love playing for each other, and I think that that's what they will do on Monday.

Q. What did those last six minutes -- obviously, about six minutes to go the lead was down to one point, but you didn't lose it. What did those last six minutes tell you about your team? And what did the end of the first half tell you about your team when Liz leaves the game in foul trouble and the lead grows?

KENNY BROOKS: Liz is a big part of what we do and we

wouldn't be here without her. But the kids, they don't panic if she's not there. They're all good. You ask me before and some people asked me about Kayana Traylor and she might have a good game and where did it come from. She's as good as Georgia. She's as good as Liz. She's as important to us as Liz. So they all can step up when they need to. Yeah, we would love to have Liz out there every second, but we're not in panic mode if Liz is not there. The kids know that. They finished that half and we weren't surprised. We knew they were capable of doing that. When the kids come to the bench when we lost the lead, Tennessee's crowd really got going, the looks on their faces is totally different now than it used to be. They have been there, they have done that. They're -- like, I have five or six kids who -- I have five kids who are thousand point scorers. I have six kids who have logged a lot of minutes. We're a veteran group. They understand it. They understand the moment. They knew we had to regroup and then they stepped back and they did. And it's not like we're regrouping against a team that's not good. That was Tennessee. That was Tennessee. Beating them for the second time just shows the resiliency of our group.

Q. If you can think back to when you first took over at Virginia Tech, I know every coach, every person's different, but did you have an idea of, by this year we want to have the program here. By this year maybe we can go to the Sweet 16, Elite 8. Is that -- I don't even know if that's how you work, but if you think back to that would you say this is ahead of schedule, on schedule, maybe the schedule doesn't matter?

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, I don't even know if there is a schedule. COVID came, you had to regroup. Transfer portal, the evolution of that element. But when I got hired here I was very selective and I didn't want to just go anywhere. I was at James Madison University, it was my alma mater, it was home, comfortable, didn't have to leave. Got an opportunity Whit Babcock approached me about the situation. I also wanted to test my wits against the best. And when he approached me I felt like Virginia Tech was sleeping giant. I felt like you could do a lot at Virginia Tech. Not a lot had been done there, but the resources, I felt like that we could build a championship-caliber program.

My press conference I remember, I thought I stuck my foot in my mouth because I think it was right after Syracuse had just went to the final game. And I had said, Well if Syracuse can do it, we can do it. And I got this big eruption. And I'm like uh oh, I better get to work. But, you know, we did it, stone by stone. Virginia Tech, that's a big saying, stone by stone. It wasn't going to happen overnight. We weren't going to attract the McDonald's All-Americans and we didn't. But what we did, it took me a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

couple years, and I figured it out, okay, this is the type of student-athlete that I want representing our program. And it started with Liz and it started with Georgia and Kayla King and Taylor Geiman and they changed the trajectory of our program, they really did. They weren't just great basketball players, they're great people, they're great students. And that's what you want. And they have embraced the community, the community's embraced them. And it's electric around our facility. Around our Cassell Coliseum. And that's how you build a program to be able to come to this level. And they work hard and they have gotten better. They have gotten to the point where they have made themselves extremely good basketball players. They didn't just come in here and rest on their laurels and their talents. They work. They work. They wear me out. I do their workouts. They wear me out. But it's all worth it to see moments like this and every second I spend with 'em.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports....

Q. I asked Kevin this. Five of the eight teams in the Elite 8 now played in their conference championship game. Just how much does being successful in that conference championship game show you can be successful in the NCAA tournament with the quick turnarounds and having to play multiple opponents with different styles in such short periods of time?

KENNY BROOKS: I think it's everything. I think playing in the ACC tournament, the teams that we had to go through. Miami. We played Miami the very first round in our conference tournament. We won that game pretty handily, very quick turnaround, we had to go up against Duke, who plays a similar style. They want to beat you up. They want to press you. We were able to game plan for them, and then we had to turn around and we had to beat Louisville.

And so playing the caliber of teams we had to play on back-to-back-to-back nights and handling our business handily, I think it's prepared us for moments like this. We're playing, and we played at home in front of a tremendous crowd, and then we come here and we played Tennessee. Tennessee's wonderful. Tennessee is great. They're talented, they're extremely talented, but we never walked out there wondering. We had people say, well, Rickea didn't play the last game. We didn't care. We were like, okay, we're good.

But I think the preparation that we have playing in our league -- I think our league is the best in the country. I'm sure the SEC will say the same thing. But we are, we have the best league in the country top to bottom and it definitely prepared us for moments like this to be able to go out and compete against the best. Because, you know, if we can win the ACC championship our kids know that we're one of the best.

