

VANDERBILT

BASKETBALL

Postgame Interview at Middle Tennessee | Monday, Nov. 15

Opening statement from head coach Shea Ralph

“I think what we’re learning about ourselves right now is that we are defined by our defense, which I think is continuing to get better and better. We made some mistakes tonight that we’re back breakers on defense, and they capitalized with their three-point shot, obviously. But it’s an opportunity for us to improve there as well. I think we’re still looking for our offensive identity. When we got open shots, we weren’t able to put them in a hoop tonight. 2-for-11 from the three-point line isn’t great and 15-for-49 isn’t gonna win you a lot of games. So I think collectively, our players and our coaches have to come together and figure that out. Again, it’s early in the season, but we need to make some strides forward there, it’s going to be really hard for us to win games throughout the year if we have this much trouble scoring every time we get on the court. So I’m more motivated than ever after this game, because I’m starting to see the fight that my players have. And it’s inspiring to me. They’ve been through a whole lot. I was really happy for Jordan today. Incredible bounce back game for her with the injuries that she’s gone through. Same with Brinae Alexander, Demi Washington and Kaylon Smith. We are continuing to gel. And I think it’s funny, it’s not, but you come from a place like UConn and the idea is that I’ll come in and sprinkle magic fairy dust and create a national championship team right away. There’s work that has to be done and it’s a journey. I want them to enjoy the journey, even the hard parts of it, because that’s what makes the destination so great. So right now we’re in the thick of it. But it’s early in the season. And tonight I saw some fight and our players that I haven’t seen yet. And that means that we’re getting better.”

What does this game mean for Tennessee women’s basketball when you can see a court with so many local players on the court at the same time?

“Yeah, I’m still getting used to the Middle Tennessee power that is here in terms of high school basketball. I mean, it expands, there is so much great talent in this area. And today before the game, my staff was telling me how many players had won state championships on this floor, which I thought was really cool. An opportunity for them to compete here in front of their friends, family, and fans and to compete against each other. Must be awesome for them. I love the opportunity to play so many good teams that are so close to where we are, I think that’s only going to make all of us better. Every team around is a good team, we scrimmaged against Belmont earlier in the year, they are great too. And a lot of those kids are from this area. So it’s fun, I think and it will be fun as we continue to move forward not only for our players here but for recruiting.”

You touched on Jordan, she’s been through a lot with her knee and everything, but she really looked good tonight with taking stuff off the dribble and creating shots.

“She’s becoming more comfortable. Some of our players haven’t played a basketball game since 2019, some of the injured ones, I think Jordan was one of those. And, I know what that’s like more than anyone, I tell her all the time. She’s had a couple of ACL’s and I had five. So I understand the way that you have to take care of your body and the way that it feels and for her to compete the way that she did while she’s playing the number of minutes that she is. She’s our captain, and to see her fight, like I said, I’m inspired by that. I know how hard it is to do and I’m so happy for her because no one deserves to bounce back game more than that kid. She works her butt off every day. And I’ll continue to work my butt off for her to make sure that we put this team in the best situation possible each time we go out on the floor.”

Coach you guys for the third straight team Middle Tennessee held under 50 points. But what makes them so challenging as a team to go attack?

“I think they’re really physical and that puts a lot of pressure on the referees. Little Rock was the same, they’re a very good defensive team. They were very similar in their physicality off the ball, so when you cut and when you’re going into the lane, they’re bumping you so that it makes some of the offensive sets or cuts or screens harder to make because you’re bumped off your line. They’re really good at that. It puts pressure on the referees because are they going to call it every time are they not? Usually they’re not. But if they do, you could get into some pretty serious foul trouble. So it’s a high risk high reward situation but it was tough and their dedication to it along with their tenacity. Hats off to them, they did a great job on defense. We knew that coming into the game. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to execute the way I would have liked on offense.”

But you were able to get to the line 16 times and were able to make 14 of those, that really kept y’all in the game. To get to the line and drive the basketball, were you pleased with the driving efforts in general?

“I was, I think we’re going to have to do it a little bit more. And we talked about that going into the game, we talked about that for us, that getting to the free throw line and making more free throws than the other team, making more than they attempt and out-rebounding is kind of our path to success. We did one the other not so much. So I think that’s a direct result when you give up

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18 offensive rebounds, you're gonna have a hard time, offensively, being able to get out in transition. And that's another thing, scoring the ball and transition, is something that I think we're getting better at. But that means you have to rebound first. So we're working our way towards becoming a more solid offensive team. Hopefully."

Coach Insell says way back when, back in the day, he coached against you in an AAU game. Do you remember that at all?

"You know, I just remember that was it Shelbyville that he was coaching. They were good. I just remember that. I remember the Tennessee teams and the California teams were a pain in the butt to play. They were so good every year. I don't remember him coaching as much. But I do remember when I first started coaching, just the Insell family. You know, he was coaching in college, and then both of his sons were in AAU, and then Ole Miss and Kentucky. And so in this area, I know that Insell name is really big, but I admired those Tennessee teams, they were really, really tough and they continue to be, they continue to be.

Would you be able to share any advice you may have gotten from coach Geno on how to develop this Vanderbilt program into a powerhouse in the SEC?

"He's not one for like direct advice. He just tells me all the time, to stay the course, to be resilient and to be confident. And, I'm all of those things anyway but it's definitely a different position when you're doing what we're trying to do with Vanderbilt. And the position that we're in right now, where I think, know and believe that we will be. He went through it a little bit at UConn. Jamelle Elliott who was there went through it at Cincinnati, Morgan Valley just was the head coach at Hartford. So they're constantly checking in on me, are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay? I'm like, I'm fine. I really do love my team and our effort, we just have to get better. We have to continue to develop, we have to make sure that we're getting great shots and making those shots. We have to execute. I'll boil it down to, he talks about being the right coach for my teams. So the things that I wanted to do when I came in, I might not be able to do and that's constantly changing with how much I learn about my team. It's really important for me to develop relationships with them on and off the court, and that takes time and effort. So yes, do I want to win right now and beat everybody's butt? Yes, that's who I am. I hate losing. But I don't know that we're losing as much as we're just getting beat, until we get better. And I told my team that right from the start, losing is different than getting beat. When you go out and fight and people are just better than you are that game, you got beat. We're not going to be losers and I thought tonight we made a huge step forward in that. But he [Geno] just keeps telling me be resilient, be confident and continue to work with my team and for my team every day, which I learned anyway at UConn.