

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Illinois vs Vanderbilt

Monday, March 23, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

**Vanderbilt Commodores**

**Coach Shea Ralph**

**Justine Pissott**

**Mikayla Blakes**

Media Conference

Vanderbilt 75, Illinois 57

**SHEA RALPH:** First of all, thank you guys for being here. I love seeing a full room of media covering our sport at Vanderbilt, where we just went to our first Sweet 16 since I've been here in five years, so it's great to see you all. Thank you for being here.

So proud of my team, the kids sitting next to me, especially these two, have been through a lot here. They came here to make a difference. They came here to do something that hadn't been done before, and we're on that path.

Tonight was a big step forward. We're going to celebrate it, but we're really excited to spend another day together tomorrow. I just can't wait to get back to work with them.

Lastly, congratulations to Illinois on an amazing season. I have a lot of respect for Shauna, the way she's building her program, the way she runs her program, the way she leads, and I know they'll be back here again next year.

**Q. Justine, you talked yesterday about the home-court advantage. You knew it was going to be your last game ever in this building tonight, and when things were maybe a little bit slow early on, you looked like the one who was locked in right from the start. What was your mindset tonight, and how big were some of those early shots going down?**

**JUSTINE PISSOTT:** I think for me, I told Coach Kev this before the game, I said, I'll fall out on the court if I have to. I knew it was my last game here in Memorial, and as much as this program and these -- everyone around me has



given to me, I just wanted to give it back one last time.

**Q. Justine, Mik was struggling a teeny bit early. When she is missing some shots -- she just missed a triple-double tonight, 10 rebounds, nine assists, four steals. When her shot isn't falling in those rare moments, how good is she at getting everybody like yourself involved and doing all those little things on the court?**

**SHEA RALPH:** I think that's what makes her special. I mean, she isn't just a person that can put the ball in the basket. I mean, she is that, but she is a facilitator. She rebounds the ball. She's just a great player all around. It's really important when she finds everybody -- there's not one person she doesn't miss on the court, and when she misses them, she'll get them the next time.

**Q. Mikayla, for you, the flow of the game, what did you see that was working so well for you guys early on? You specifically but also the team.**

**MIKAYLA BLAKES:** Yeah, I just was looking for my shooters coming off ball screens. I think they were tagging our roller a lot, so left them wide open, so continued to find Justine, and Jak, I found her, Aubrey, as well, in transition. I feel like once we were able to shoot the ball real well from the three, the lane opens up.

**Q. How does this one compare to Oklahoma, Texas, obviously some of those other big wins but obviously on a bigger stage, bigger spotlight tonight?**

**JUSTINE PISSOTT:** I think for me, it's my last game in Memorial, and we're going to the Sweet 16. We have never done that here since I've been here, Mikayla has been here and even Coach Ralph, and I think that's what makes it a lot different than the other games.

**Q. Mikayla, seems like almost every night lately you're surpassing something, doing something. Tonight you became the all-time sophomore scoring record holder. How does that feel to be able to put another thing by your name that you've accomplished this season?**



SHEA RALPH: She had no idea.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, thank you for telling me. It's just exciting. To be able to do it in Memorial, have my family in the stands, be around my coaches, my teammates, as well. They're the reason why I'm able to do the things I can, and without them I wouldn't be here. It's a great thing. I love it. I'm thankful for the people around me.

**Q. Mikayla, you're about to face the Fighting Irish and previous teammate on Team USA, Hannah Hidalgo. How do you prepare to face someone that you've previously been teammates with but have never competed with on the court?**

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Just take it how we do every single game. I think when we come into a tournament we have to continue to be us, and we're going to make our game plan our game plan, but she's a really good player, and we're going to play her like that, too.

**Q. Justine, felt like early you guys were trading buckets back and forth, but when Aiyana Mitchell came in it felt like she provided a spark. What did you see from her tonight?**

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Yeah, she's a special player. Every time she comes in she brings that spark for us on defense, and I think that gets the rest of us going and motivated. She impacts the game a lot when she comes on the court, so I'm very thankful for her.

**Q. What was discussed in the fourth quarter about how to navigate and get out of that press? If there was a rough patch a couple turnovers there, how did you guys navigate that and get out of it?**

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Stopped turning the ball over.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: That was it, yeah.

SHEA RALPH: In so many words.

**Q. For both of you, this was obviously a goal. It's not the end goal for you, but can you appreciate after everything you've been through just this moment tonight of punching that ticket to the Sweet 16?**

MIKAYLA BLAKES: I mean, yeah, I'm going to appreciate it for tonight, but life goes on. Life moves on. We have more games to play, and we're going to focus on that, but to be able to do it, this is what I came here to do. And to continue to do it, not just stop here, but for the upcoming years, as well, be able to compete for championships. I

feel like this is a step in the right direction for this program.

JUSTINE PISSOTT: I would agree with exactly what she says.

**Q. Why is Coach Ralph so effective?**

JUSTINE PISSOTT: We'll be here for a long time. I'll say it short. I think she's changed my life. I'm going to get emotional so I'm not going to say a lot. But I'm super thankful for her.

Not only is she a great human being, but, like, the amount of times we've had conversation about faith and God is what makes her so special. She knows how important he is to me, and last night we had a conversation, and she wrote me a letter, and it was just tears to my eyes.

I don't know, I'm so thankful for her, and I'm very grateful that I'm in this position and have more games to play with her.

MIKAYLA BLAKES: Yeah, to second Justine, I'm going to try not to get emotional, either, but this is a woman who cares more about you than a basketball player. This past year I did struggle a little bit, just feeling I didn't have a break. She's the first person to reach out to me. She knows. She goes, I know you're not going to tell me, but I see you're struggling. What can I do to help you, things like that. And we're going to find joy in your life. She found joy in my life.

I feel like this year she brought joy back to basketball for me. It was something I was struggling with a lot, but I couldn't ask for a better head coach, better mentor, better role model. This is a human being you want in your life, and she's like a second mother figure to me, which is why my mom was 100 percent full ride, like let's go to Vanderbilt, play under Coach Ralph.

**Q. Justine, your last game at Memorial. What has Vanderbilt meant to you, and what do you hope that you meant to Vanderbilt?**

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Oh, man. Vanderbilt has meant a lot to me. Like Mikayla said, she was struggling. They picked me up at one of my lowest moments in my life. I was struggling a lot after freshman year, had a loss of a grandfather, and these people picked me up when I didn't know I could be picked up.

They just kept picking me up every single day.

I just hope I left a joyful and positive impact on everybody here around me. I may not have scored a lot, I may not

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

have done a lot. But I tried to be a leader for everybody around me, and I hope that they have noticed that.

Yeah, just, I don't even know. That's all I've got.

**Q. How important was it, how special was it playing at home in the round of 32 in front of so many Vanderbilt fans, and what does the crowd, all the signs mean to you guys?**

JUSTINE PISSOTT: Yeah, it's special. Like we've been saying, coming here has been one of the greatest decisions of my life. I have my dad here in the stands. He has supported me since day one. The fans have supported us since day one. The first people that come into the student section are our practice players, and I think that just goes to show the community that we've built here.

We have so many young people that look up to us, and it's pretty special.

**Q. Shea, just some tears from you, as well. What has this group meant to you? I know you're not done yet but a lot of emotion. Want to get your thoughts on that.**

SHEA RALPH: Yeah, it is, I think, okay to have emotion. I try not to be emotional. I try to teach them not to operate emotionally, but we're human beings and we have emotion.

I think what you just heard from those two, and everybody has a story, I talk about this all the time, we all have stories. I'm a basketball coach because I love basketball, but I get to lead women. I get to impact lives positively. That's my real job. That's my job because people did it for me, and if I'm honest, that lady sitting right back there, she did it for me, too.

We have a great community of people here who lift women up, who know when to lead and know when to follow, who play the game of basketball really well because we love it, who pour into people really well.

We came here to win; that's the name of the game. But at the end of the day, if we can help them learn how to be winners, how to handle adversity, how to be strong women, what it looks like to be part of a community and part of a team, then we've done our jobs. We've done our jobs.

And the last thing I'll say is that I get emotional talking about Candice because I think what makes me so proud to be at Vanderbilt, why I love it so much here is that we get the opportunity and the platform and the stage right now to show people, to show the world what it looks like to invest in women. That's what she does every single day. She

invests in women. She invests in protecting the experience of the college student-athlete. She invests in people. She invests in leaders. She does it with an open heart. She does it on the biggest stage. She does it day in and day out.

The things that I do for my players, that woman back there has done for me. It's allowed me to pay it forward. We wouldn't be where we are without her and the partnership with the chancellor.

But it's from the top down, so the way that I lead is the way that she leads, and we're just grateful, all of us, to be here at Vanderbilt.

**Q. We were lucky enough to hear from Justine, but you have three more players who also played their last games tonight here, so what can you tell us about them?**

SHEA RALPH: I do. Shoot, we're going to be here all night, y'all.

You saw Sacha was super emotional today. This was her true senior night. If you remember, she didn't get to play on the night that we honored our seniors, and this is also her last game at Memorial, and the kid that's been here with us the longest, through all the ups and downs, 99 percent of it you guys don't see, and that's okay, but you get to see the growth and the impact that she's had.

What a beautiful thing to have a player commit to five years, through some really hard things, to building something that's hard to do, and if it were easy you'd see a lot of other people doing it and sustain it.

So it's really exciting for me to be able to see her experience this moment here today.

Jada Brown is the same, lots of ups and downs, she's been here with us for four years, not five. Lost her father last summer. It was really, really, really hard for her. We weren't sure we were going to get her back, and we did, and now you're seeing her make a huge impact on our team to help us get where we are and also finding joy in the role that she's playing and the teammates that she has around her and her family that's here a lot, as well.

Then Ndjakalenga. You can't say enough about that kid who really bet on us after going to a Final Four last year and playing an important role on that team. She came here, she had faith in our plan for her, she had faith that we were going to do something special, as well. So all of them hold a very special in our heart. We wouldn't be here tonight without them.

**Q. Shea, you've talked a lot about how this is a team. Watching what Mikayla did with that -- just filling up the stat sheet, people focus on her being a scorer, but as you've pointed out she can do lots of other things. Did we see the entire array tonight?**

SHEA RALPH: You saw most of it. It might have been my fault that she didn't get the triple-double. But I think that Justine hit it on the head. She's a really good basketball player, and I think right now the narrative is that she's a great scorer. She is that, but she's also a great teammate. She also is a great play maker. She's a great defender. She's a great passer. She's a great decision maker. She's fun to coach.

I say it every day, she's an MFER, so when it was time for us to separate, did she miss any shots? No. She made the toughest ones. It was time for us to separate, the ball was in her hands. But she knows. Justine is going to make the shots that she makes. Aubrey and her are going to play together, play off each other. I think Miche came in and gave us huge minutes, Sacha came in and does what she does, Ndjakalenga did what she does. Who else? Ava came in, Ava and Jada came in. It was a full team effort, but no one had to do more than what they're great at.

Everyone showed up today, did what they're great at, and this is exactly what we need from them, day in and day out, which is what we've been saying from the beginning of the year. Nothing has to change. It doesn't matter who we play. We turn around, we get a day off and we're going to prepare like we've been preparing all year for the next game because we get a next game, which is really cool.

**Q. You've been through a lot of March Madness brackets, Coach, as a player and as a coaching staff, UConn. What are the lessons of March? What are the things you're preaching to your team? Or is it nothing's different? Give us a little insight.**

SHEA RALPH: I think the lessons of March that I learned before I got here was that nothing can be different. Great players, great teams understand what's on the line in March. But that's why you start preparing in the summer. You prepare in November, December, January like you will prepare in March. So you don't have to get ready. You don't have to -- what is it, rise to the level or the occasion because you're going to fall to the level of your standards.

We operate here every day, on the court, off the court, in the classroom, in the community. There are no exceptions to that. So nothing has to change. We're ready. We're prepared. Now we just have to continue doing what we're

doing, put our head down, stay focused on the work, elimination distractions and get ready for our next game.

**Q. Shea, two-part question, if you will. One, just surface level, what everybody sees. You get a big crowd here tonight, second-round game. I know you've been building for that. You win and you're off to the Sweet 16. What does that mean? The second part of it, in building a program that can do that, you elicit the emotions we just saw from Mikayla and Justine about the interpersonal part of that. How gratifying is that while winning basketball?**

SHEA RALPH: I would say to the first part of your question, I was blessed to be able to play in front of a full stand of people, of 10,000 people every game, and I think when I was a player, I took that for granted. I did. But I did learn along the way, especially when I wasn't able to play, how important community was and how those fans and that community and the students and the parents and the teachers and all the people that showed up poured into me as a human being, so I always wrapped my identity around a basketball player, but they lifted me up.

So to be here tonight and Saturday and Saturday night and see our fans, Commodore nation, our alums, our professors, our coaching community, our athletes, little kids, my daughter, our families show up and do the same thing for us, they poured into us. They lifted us up.

We wouldn't be here without them. I just want them to know that we know that and that we will continue to honor that you show up for us. We will play for you always, and hopefully we will be able to show up for you in many, many other ways than just playing a basketball game. We represent you, and we're very proud to do that.

The second part of the question, I don't know that I would use the word "gratifying," although I understand it. I think that this is just the plan and purpose for my life. It's that simple. My steps have been ordered. I have faith in that. I have faith in the people that God has put around me, and I understand that those he challenges deeply, he expects a lot from.

So for me, I've been through a lot. I've also experienced a lot of amazing things. Wouldn't it be a shame if I wasn't able to do that for the next generation, if I wasn't able to use what I learned, the things that I got to experience as a player, the ways that I'm growing as a woman, as a leader, as a coach, as a wife, as a mom, to be able to show the next generation of women that they can do the same thing, to teach them how to do the same thing, on and off the basketball court.

That's the plan and purpose for my life, and I'm going to live it out boldly.

**Q. How do you change those emotions and tears into momentum, like you were talking about?**

SHEA RALPH: I think you acknowledge them. I think you just let -- the feelings are normal. That's a normal part of life, and it's cool that you have them, and I want them to celebrate that it's meaningful, and then they understand we get to work the next day.

Listen, if you had known me 20 years ago you wouldn't have gotten as much advice. I'm telling you, I learned the hard way a lot. But I think you just acknowledge it. You acknowledge it. Emotions are a normal part of life. I love that they feel comfortable enough to have them. We do have a lot of conversations, and that's important, too.

But we celebrate tonight. We have a great time together. We acknowledge what we've done to get to this point, and then we wake up tomorrow like Mikayla said, and it's another day. The past is the past, and now we get -- hopefully we get tomorrow. We'll do our best with that day and then hopefully we'll have another day and we'll do our best with that day, as well.

**Q. Shea, six SEC teams are in the Sweet 16, but there's going to be two games SEC on SEC, South Carolina/Oklahoma, Texas/Kentucky. Nice sign of the conference's strength at this stage, but might it have been better if it was a little spread out?**

SHEA RALPH: You know, I can't control it. I think it's a great sign for the conference. You can't really control if it's spread out or not. But you know how we feel about the SEC conference. It's the best conference in the country. If you want to win a championship, you're going to have to come through us, so it's not a surprise to me that we're seeing that many teams in.

We'll see -- hopefully we'll continue to be one of them.

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