

April 6, 2010



Connecticut – 53
Stanford – 47

An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: I'd like to welcome up to the dais Stanford head coach Tara VanDerveer, as well as student-athletes Nneka Ogwumike and Kayla Pedersen.

COACH VANDERVEER: I want to congratulate UConn on a national championship, and a great second half. Their players really stepped up big. They were physical the whole game, then they knocked down some shots in the second half.

And then, secondly, I'd like to compliment Stanford, our team, and the players up here, Nneka and Kayla, who really battled for us. We just -- we came up short. We did not score as we needed to score.

But I'm really proud of them. And I thought that they really worked very hard for our team. Not just tonight, but all year.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Kayla, you guys said yesterday you couldn't let them go on a run, and that's what they started the second half with. Could you talk about this for a few minutes?

KAYLA PEDERSEN: Going into halftime, we all told everybody that we know they're going to

make their run. You know, we have to keep playing our lockdown defense. 12 points in the first half was extremely helpful for us. But we weren't able to capitalize and come back from that.

And I think we kept fighting, kept fighting, but things weren't falling. And we got a little bit extended on defense more so than we should have. They started rebounding a little bit better. And, I don't know, we needed to make our own run, and we didn't really do that.

Q. Nneka, could you just talk about the second half? It seemed like they really locked down on you and tried to do whatever they could to take you out of it.

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I mean, yeah, they were sagging in. And it was as if every time I went into the block and tried to make a move, there was always someone there waiting for me. They were sagging off our other posts and there was a lot of help-side. It wasn't really easy to score. And usually I would get passes off of them helping up. And I was able to finish when my teammate would pass it to me when they helped off the weak side.

But it was definitely congested. But in the second half we were definitely stagnant in the -- I wouldn't say the first ten minutes, we didn't score for a while, and they were scoring. I think we played pretty good defense. We just couldn't respond on the offensive end.

Q. Both you girls, the first half they could throw it in the ocean. You all weren't a heck of a lot better. Was it just the dome, the spaciousness, the stage? What do you think was going on?

KAYLA PEDERSEN: No, I don't think it was the dome. I don't think it was the floor. I think both teams were just playing very good defense. Taking away everybody's strengths. Both teams stuck to their game plan in the first half. But, I mean, we were taking good shots. They just didn't fall.

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I mean, in the first half, I think it was just-- we played exceptionally good defense in the first half. I think that was great. We held them to 12 points.

I mean, I don't know how it was for them, but I just don't think we were concentrating enough on our shots. I know I wasn't. I could have made a lot of shots in the first half. But it was just kind of -- I think we were either over- or underfocusing. It was one of the two.

And it was causing us to miss shots that we make every day.

Q. Nneka, Maya Moore had as much trouble as everyone else on her team in the first half, but then she was the catalyst in the second half. Did you fear it was just a matter of time before she got off?

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I wasn't fearing anything. I was trying my hardest on defense. My coaches told me I did a good job defensively the first half. The second half I was getting screened more.

And they were screening each other more. So it caused a lot of kind of franticness because we were switching. And so I think that's kind of how she kind of got off.

But I can't say that I was fearing that she was going to get going. The goal is to stop her from get going. And I think we did a pretty good job of that in the first half.

Q. Nneka, just a little bit more on Maya Moore. Did she do anything that you hadn't expected? You had seen a tape of her for quite a while now. Can you comment about what it was like to play against her and just how good she really was?

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I mean, this is the third time that I've guarded her. She didn't do -- I wouldn't say she did anything different. She's a good player. She works hard on trying to get open and works hard on hitting down her shots.

And, I mean, she's a hard person to guard. I had a hard time guarding her all three times. I tried my best each time. I think I did a little bit better today.

But I wouldn't say that she did anything different.

Q. I have two questions. One is with respect to your other post, Jayne Appel. She appeared to be visibly in pain for good portions

of the game. Could you talk at all about how that was for her, if you know? The second is: You seem to be playing a little bit further from the hoop than is often the case. Was that something they were doing to you on defense, or was that part of your game strategy?

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: With regard to Jayne, honestly, I didn't see what had happened. I saw she was in pain, but that's the extent of my knowledge about that. It's always tough to go down in a game as big as this. But honestly, I mean, I know right now she's probably hurting more from the loss than whatever injury it is or even if it is an injury.

And me being away from the basket today, I think we didn't want to -- I didn't want -- Tara told us she didn't want us to congest the paint any more than it was. We tried our best to spread things out. I mean, that's pretty much the extent of that.

Q. Kayla, can you talk a little bit about Jayne's struggle tonight? The 0-for-12 was kind of a big number sticking out on that box score, but how did that impact what you guys do offensively?

KAYLA PEDERSEN: I mean, I think Jayne gave it her all. She's probably upset about that. But, I mean, she's the force of our team. We're not going to stop going to her. She kept battling through.

One of the great things about her is she's very unselfish. If she's not scoring, she's going to dish out the ball to other players that are wide open, because Jayne demands attention.

So, I mean, no, I'm just very proud of her for fighting through all the pain. She never let any of us know what was going on, because she didn't want that on her mind. So I'm just very proud of her today.

Q. Both players, could you talk about what was the mood and the thinking at halftime? You've only given up 12 points but you're only up by 8?

KAYLA PEDERSEN: I'd say we were focused. We weren't all high from being up, because we were up at halftime in December and we know what happened after that.

But we were just very focused, and just kept telling each other, 20 more minutes and keep doing what we're doing. But unfortunately that

didn't happen.

Q. Nneka or Kayla, whoever wants to answer, sort of in the same vein, after halftime, you know, you guys missed some easy shots. So probably wish you'd been up a little bit more. You knew UConn was going to make a run, because they always do. Still, when they made their run, at the end you guys didn't give up. And I'm wondering if you're going to be able to take anything from the way you were resilient at the very end of the game into the rest of your careers?

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I mean, absolutely. You learn from every game. We knew that they were going to come out on a run, because we kind of locked them down defensively in the first half. But at the same time, like you said, we could have made easier shots that could have created a larger lead.

I think what we learned most about this game is how poised we stayed, and also how hard we want to continue to work to be able to get to where we want to go.

Q. Does this hurt a little bit more because you realize if you had played better tonight, it was there for the taking?

KAYLA PEDERSEN: Definitely. Yeah, I think our whole team is hurting right now to be that close. You know, to be winning at halftime and to make our run at the very end. It hurts to lose. But, I mean, quite frankly, I'm just angry. I don't want to be that LSU team that never wins a national championship. So I think that's what the players that are returning are thinking right now. And I know Nneka and I were talking, we're just so ready to go.

And for the players that aren't returning, I mean, I'm just so proud of them and this whole entire team. This is probably my favorite team that I've played on all three years, and I'm glad I'm losing with them.

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: And I think that's why it hurts the most, too, also, because I've only been here for two years, and this team -- I mean, it's more special than any team I've ever been on, AAU, high school, middle school, anything. I think that's why it hurts the most, because we wanted to win it with this group of people. But life moves on. You keep working.

Q. Nneka, can you talk about UConn's defense? What did they do in the second half that maybe they weren't doing in the first?

NNEMKADI OGWUMIKE: I think they just kind of amped it up like they did when we played them December 23rd. They weren't -- I wouldn't say -- they kind of pressed us a little bit more. They were trying to pressure us, and also sag in.

And so they were leaving people, and they were flying out on some people. And the people that they were leaving, for example, me, I mean, I could have hit some shots, and, quite frankly, that's all I'm thinking about right now, just going back and improving.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions for Coach.

Q. Tara, can you talk about the first half versus the second half, the difference between the two and the struggles you guys just had trying to score?

COACH VANDERVEER: I don't know that it was an extreme difference. I think we wasted a lot of opportunities in both halves. And I think that it's -- Jayne being healthy and just playing a regular game, in all four years, you could correct me if I'm wrong, but I've never seen her go O-fer.

She had some really nice shots early. I thought people were rushing shots. I think she wanted to play well. Very badly. She's playing against Tina Charles since she was 11 years old.

And she really battled. And she was in a lot of pain. And just kept going at it. But the ball was not dropping for her. So without getting any low block scoring from Jayne, and I think that -- I thought they did a good job.

But you have to know that Nneka coming off of 38 points, this was -- it was very physical. And, you know, Nneka just -- is going to have to really learn from this. And we needed to have some kind of go-to playing. And we didn't have that.

I thought Kayla stepped up for us. We had some inopportune turnovers. They did go on that big run. Defensively, I thought we worked very hard and did a great job in the first half. I can't even imagine them only scoring 12 points. That is really just -- it was just an incredible job defensively and focused.

But offensively, we -- besides Kayla, basically we didn't have anyone show up that was making shots for us or -- it was a struggle.

But I guess our defense was awesome. And I thought, you know, you look at statistically, the field goals attempted, pretty much the same. 3s are pretty much the same. They got a lot more free throws than we did.

Just offensive boards. We worked hard to keep them off the offensive boards. They're similar, although maybe not -- they blocked more shots than we did. But our fouling, I mean, that's not -- some of it I think was at the end also fouling, wanted to try to get the ball.

I think someone already said it was there for the taking.

Q. I think it was yesterday, one of the days, you said that you thought realistically they may have to have an off game for you all to win. Well, you know, your defense had something to do with that. But they also had that off game. Yet you weren't able to win the game. How frustrating and disappointing is that? You got what you wanted, but still weren't able to get over the top.

COACH VANDERVEER: It's very disappointing. And it's very frustrating. I think what's the hardest is Jayne having such a great career at Stanford and I just -- I'm really sad for her to go out on this kind of game when last year, even though we lost, last year she had 25.

She just was not able to push off her ankle, and her foot's bothering her. And I'm more sad for her than anything else.

But as other people said, it just -- you know, Connecticut is -- they're beating these people by 30 and 40 points. And we had a chance. And I just feel like we wasted some opportunities.

Q. Could you talk about your strategy against Maya and what worked in the first half and what wasn't working in the second half?

COACH VANDERVEER: Well, in the second half I don't think we switched quick enough on her. We were really looking to switch on her. And Tina started setting more screens on her and harder screens. And for Nneka, especially, I think she usually probably plays against a post player. They have four perimeter players. She sometimes plays against perimeter players.

But I thought our team -- you know, Maya Moore was the difference, you know? If she's on our team, we win. She really stepped up and made big plays for them.

Tina Charles made a couple of plays down the stretch. But, really, she's a great player and she made big plays.

We weren't doing anything differently in the second half, but we weren't doing things as well in the second half. I think the fact that we couldn't score just -- it discourages you, too.

Q. Why exactly did you take Rosalyn out and why did she play so little?

COACH VANDERVEER: You know, I think Ros for us does a great job if she is what I call a lockdown defender. And in this game we were switching a lot. And it was harder for her to maybe to get that concept and help more.

And the way they were playing Ros, they were off of her. They were sagging in off of her. And I didn't feel like she was recognizing when she was open and what shots to take.

And I thought in the beginning of the game she was dribbling too much. Of course, no one really came in and hit perimeter shots any more than she did. But we needed perimeter shooting.

And I thought -- I mean, JJ hit one. But she was like, what, 1-for-9. Kayla was hitting for us. Jeanette was hitting a little bit. We needed that kind of third person. And I kind of tried to look at it -- I also thought Mel helped us run our offense a little bit.

Q. This is your third consecutive Final Four. But this finish was not like the last two that we saw. I wonder if you could just reflect a little bit about it. I know it's really tough because you lost again. But this was so much different than the Tennessee and then Connecticut last year.

COACH VANDERVEER: Well, I mean, these are -- I really feel like our team came in playing with confidence, and just we have more pieces. But at the same time, just you can feel sometimes so close and at the same time feel so far away.

We just -- I think we really had a great year. Our coaches and players worked very hard. And I'm not -- I'm not saying -- I'm very proud of what we've accomplished. But when you -- we did come much closer. I think we really learned a lot from that Tennessee game. And we learned that it was going to be very physical.

What you see all year is not what you see in the championship game. And our team was

ready for that. And it was very physical. And we have to be more physical. Last year against Connecticut we were outplayed and we got down early. But we didn't take advantage of opportunities, from my estimation.

I mean, whether it was really some inopportune turnovers, really point-blank shots, not getting to the free throw line, we never got out in transition. And just some people that, you know, this is -- there was more in this game than what maybe some people understood.

Q. Can you talk about that first-half defense and just what was it that went right, other than I guess everything?

COACH VANDERVEER: Well, I think we switched well. We were out on people. We didn't leave people wide open for shots. And we protected the baskets and didn't give them second shots for the most part. That was our game plan. I thought we came in and executed it very well. And to hold Connecticut to 53 points, you know, maybe they didn't shoot well.

But some of that is related to people playing good defense and not giving them a lot of second shots. Unfortunately, we sent them to the free-throw line too many times.

But our inability to score really hurt us.

Q. Could you talk a little bit more about what your game plan was coming into the game and what parts of it succeeded, what parts didn't?

COACH VANDERVEER: Well, I think defensively we played -- we had -- we were switching on their perimeter people. We wanted to box out. We wanted to get back and not let them get easy run-outs. We wanted to take care of the ball. Offensively, we wanted to go inside to Nneka. We wanted to go inside to Jayne. And then that would open up things for our perimeter people.

Kayla, I thought, had a great game. She knocked down perimeter shots. Jeanette hit some perimeter shots for us. Jeanette getting into foul trouble hurt us.

But besides that, we turned it over, and we didn't get the production we need from our post player, Nneka and Jayne. That's what our game is: Go inside. And when that -- when we struggle with that, we struggled.

Q. (Question off microphone)?

COACH VANDERVEER: Some of that was not by design. She had to battle in there and

be more aggressive against Maya Moore. And Maya Moore is a terrific player. She's probably got, I don't know, 10 or 15 pounds on Nneka, and it was really battling for position.

That wasn't, you know -- that wasn't by design. But Nneka is a young player. And she will learn from this and watch it and say, hey, this is what I need to be doing.

Q. I realized you just walked off the court, but I wonder if -- does tonight tell us that the gap between you and them and maybe them and some other top teams has narrowed a little bit?

COACH VANDERVEER: I wish I was in the second press conference and then I could say yes. But maybe they had a bad night. We were in the game and then we just -- we didn't sustain what we needed to for 40 minutes. I don't think there's -- I mean, for us we have played competitively with them for the most part I think every time. And now they'll be coming out to Stanford. And that will be a good thing for our team, I think.

Let's see about it. I guess I'll leave that -- they've gone two straight seasons undefeated. I think they deserve a tremendous amount of credit. And let's take care -- we have to -- we can't talk about it. We have to beat them to close the gap.

Q. I know this stings, but is there still a positive here in terms of maintaining Stanford's position and going forward with the team you have for the next year or so?

COACH VANDERVEER: Definitely. You know, for years and years and years, the only matchup that people wanted to see was Tennessee and Connecticut. And I think that we have -- I think we're establishing a great East Coast/West Coast rivalry, Stanford and UConn.

As you heard the young players that are returning, we came into the game and we're very disappointed we didn't win a national championship and that we didn't win the game. But to be in three Final Fours, two national championship games in three years, you've got to knock on the door.

And, I mean, I just know -- just listening, as an example, to Mike Krzyzewski, they won four national championships. Been in the championship game eight times. This is one, two -- we've won two out of four times. So we

need to work hard and get back.

And we need this to be motivating and inspiring for our team. And we need it to be extremely painful. The fact that it is painful and we're not just saying we're happy to be here is a good thing for us at Stanford.

Q. I hate to end on this note, but offensively, starting with the Xavier game, and then these last three games, you had a big game from Nneka against Oklahoma and you needed it, because offensively everybody else didn't have a great night. This was not a great night. I have to ask, what happened to the offense the last three games, in your mind?

COACH VANDERVEER: Well, I think a lot of it, you know, we have -- we've gotten here with the great play of Jayne. And again she has battled. But she is hurt. And we needed her in there defensively, just with her size and her rebounding, and she did a great job rebounding for us. But offensively she really struggled.

On top of that, then we did have good shooting and good perimeter scoring from Kayla and Jeanette tonight. But in the Xavier game and in the Oklahoma game, we really struggled with our perimeter shooting.

I mean, you can have maybe a bad night, but I think it's clear, to me anyways, what we need our team doing. And I think that this will only motivate people more to understand, you know, we need people in the gym, improving our perimeter shooting, and there are a lot of things we can do and take -- take a lot of positives from this experience with our team.

So I'm disappointed. I know our team is hurting. But I feel very encouraged with how hard people played and all the great things that will come out of this for our program.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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