

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: Arizona vs Stanford

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Alamodome

Stanford Cardinal Tara VanDerveer

Finals Postgame Media Conference

Stanford 54, Arizona 53

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by head coach Tara VanDerveer. We'll take questions.

Q. Back in 1992, if you had known it would be 29 years before you would be climbing up that ladder again, would you have imagined no way will I still be coaching by then?

TARA VANDERVEER: I never really thought about it. This isn't why I coach. I wanted to be a teacher. Each year is a great year. I enjoy working with all the our players. But I guess the first thing I just want to say is I just want to congratulate Arizona on a great year, great job that they did. They really, really had a great tournament. I'm really excited to take the trophy back to the Pac-12.

Also I want to thank the Pac-12 coaches, every university in the Pac-12, for the commitment to women's basketball, Pac-12 network, the great coaches we have in our league got us ready for this moment. It was a very, very tough tournament to play the three games in a week, to deal with all the COVID stuff, I'm so proud of our team.

Q. The leadership of some of the players who maybe don't play a ton of minutes like Alyssa, what they did during a very long slog.

TARA VANDERVEER: Alyssa Jerome is amazing. You hit the nail on the head, the leadership. Anna Wilson, Alyssa Jerome, Kiana, the things they did to keep it together. I think honestly the adversity we faced off the court helped us on the court.

Today's game, we got a great performance from Haley and Cam and Lexie. Ashten helped us. They really locked down on Key, but she stayed with things. I'm so proud of



this team, not for just their basketball but for being able to get through this COVID and be so mature. Not have anyone test positive on our team through the whole winter, it's awesome.

Q. I thought it was really neat you were at the bottom of the ladder hugging each one of your players and support staff, a really neat touch. 29 years ago you last won the title. This group got another one for you. What does it mean to get this third championship, to have gone through what you've gone through so many years, so many great teams?

TARA VANDERVEER: I really feel like we won this for all of the great players that have played at Stanford. Going back to, we went to three Elite 8s and never made to it Final Four with great players like Candice Wiggins, Brooke Smith, Jillian Harmon. Then we got to the Final Four with Candice and Roz and Nneka and Chiney and Jayne Appel. We were right here in San Antonio, had the lead at halftime. Jayne was playing on a broken foot. Since then, going to the Final Four with great players like Erica McCall and Karlie Samuelson, Karlie sprains her ankle.

We had some special karma going for us. When we dodged the bullet -- we had to come back against Louisville, dodged a bullet against South Carolina, dodged a bullet against Arizona.

I think sometimes you got to be lucky. I will admit it, we were fortunate. We were very fortunate to win.

Q. When you won in '92, you said that the final seconds of that Final Four game was the longest second of your life. How did that compare to the second where Aari McDonald's shot was in the air tonight?

TARA VANDERVEER: It wasn't a one-point game that I remember in '92. I haven't watched that game for probably 29 years. It was the longest second. We had played Arizona I think it was three years ago at home. She put up that same shot. That shot went in, then came out. This shot I don't think went in, but we knew she was taking that shot. I think three people on the court went to her, which

was a good thing.

Q. You've spoken about all the players you've had over the years. In particular since winning that title in '92, how have those teams impacted you and your coaching style to winning this title?

TARA VANDERVEER: I really told our team before the game that whether we won this game or we didn't win this game, it doesn't change you fundamentally as a person. I had some just fantastic, Kate Starbird's team '97, where we lost in the semifinals. It's heartbreaking to go through that.

I know that these women are kind of on the shoulders of those women. Former players would be so proud to be part of this team because of the resilience they've shown, because of the sisterhood that they represent. I'm just thrilled for this team, but also for all the women out there that played at Stanford.

Q. Haley was hurt last year, then not having a tournament. She talked about how she had to dig deep and come back. Being Most Outstanding Player, put in perspective the journey she's had in the last year.

TARA VANDERVEER: Haley obviously had a season-ending injury last year. We didn't have training in the spring or training in the summer. I think what she has done is really amazing. She comes back -- she was a go-to player on the stretch, no two ways about it. When we wanted a basket, we went to Haley and she delivered. There were some shots that she missed, but she was always right at the rim.

I think a young player like that, she really stepped up. I think what you see with Haley is the tip of the iceberg. I think what I really respect about what she's done, through this season Haley has really changed in practice. She's a loose, fun young woman, but she gets serious in practice. She's talking. She's a very intelligent player.

I'm really excited for her upside, and I'm very happy for her to win the MVP. I actually told her, Haley, step up and play the game you can, at halftime, you'll be the MVP, and she was.

Q. I'm not going to put words in your mouth again tonight, so I'll just ask, what are your thoughts on the team's defensive effort?

TARA VANDERVEER: You know, Pepper, I thought our team played very well defensively. Anna Wilson is a terrific defender. I know Aari had 22 points, but she had to work very hard for each one of those points.

I thought our whole team bought into playing defense. I thought we rebounded pretty well. We struggled with some turnovers, so that will give us something to work on in the spring.

Q. About the COVID bubble, you've been in this bubble for the past few weeks. How does it feel being able to finally go out of it? What are some of the things y'all experienced within the bubble?

TARA VANDERVEER: For our team, this was actually probably a little bit less strict than where we are at Stanford. You could be outside, people would not have masks on. Restaurants were open and things. That's not the way it's been for us in California.

So this was not an adjustment for us at all. I think the way COVID is right now, it's too early to relax. I'm glad the NCAA has been very strict for us, because we want to be healthy.

We've got to just stay with it, kind of get through this time, then hopefully our next year's fall and winter, our tournament, will be back to normal.

Q. The confetti was falling, the players were cutting the net, your assistant coaches. What was going through your mind seeing all of them celebrate after all you've been through through the pandemic? How did it feel that it's finally done? The fans may not know, how tough was that Arizona team? How exciting was it to play that team tonight?

TARA VANDERVEER: The Arizona team was really tough. Again, Adia and her staff, Aari is like super quick. They just built on their confidence, just built and built and built throughout the tournament. The fact that we'd beaten them twice, quite honestly in Arizona we beat them very badly. A real credit to their team and staff. They played great.

What I was thinking about was, I can't believe it. We're just like, Is this really happening? This whole year has been so weird, everything about it. I'm so excited, happy for our team, our fans, our parents, everything. I think it will really sink in tomorrow.

Q. You did a pregame interview with Kevin, saying the last nine seconds against South Carolina felt like a root canal. What did the last six seconds of this game feel like?

TARA VANDERVEER: I was back in that dentist's chair. I mean, it was painful. The fact when we had the ball, we

needed to hang on to it, at least get a shot up. At least we held onto the ball for a while.

But that's the way basketball is. If you've got a faint heart or weak stomach, then don't coach.

Q. Kiana just shared a story from months ago in the fall when the group came back together, and they broke quarantine after four days, decided to go somewhere nearby and have a little pickup game. She said you were heartbroken and disappointed. The only way they could make it up to you in their minds was to come and win it all. Take us through that little stretch. Protocols were very strict at that point. You weren't into Maples. How much growth did you see from this group in terms of being better leaders?

TARA VANDERVEER: Well, what happened, one of the players came back, we do the five-day testing, test on day one and test on day five. When they were clear on day one, they assumed they were clear. When they were positive on day five and day four, they had gone to the gym. It was a breach of protocol, and I have to say that like I'm worried about it. I'm not their age. I was hurt. I was upset. I let them know that.

I think, though, that developed more trust with us as a staff with our players. They understood that you have to be accountable. But since then, we did have staff test positive, three staff, but no players. I think that incident helped us because they were quarantined for 14 days. That cut into our practice beginning of the year. They realize, I don't want to be in quarantine any more.

But it was a very tough year. That was just the beginning of it. But I think that really set the tone, that said, We're going to be honest, we're going to be trustworthy, and we need that from all of us.

I think it was a learning experience.

Q. Haley said she thought you guys deserved some credit for grittiness tonight. She said you and Cate are always telling them, No more Stanford nice girls. What do you think about that?

TARA VANDERVEER: I think Haley is exactly right. I said this game was not a pretty game, but it was a gritty game. We had to dig in. They're very athletic. They're very quick. They're very fast.

At this level, sometimes they really let a lot of physical play go. We had to toughen up. We had to dig in. I'm really proud of our team for doing that. Whether it was Anna trying to take a charge, whether it was Lexie, whether it

was Haley or Key. We had a lot of people on the ground. We had to battle.

I think our grit and resilience really helped us get the nets.

Q. You mentioned the grittiness, some of the determination you needed to have. Is this title kind of reflective of that? Plus the 29-years, it's been a long journey on a number of different levels.

TARA VANDERVEER: It has been. I think everyone in our locker room is really ready to get home. I mean, we've been on the road, I can't even count the number of days.

This is the time we live in. Sometimes you just have to stick with things. For me as a coach, again, you want to win a national championship. We have had shots at it. I've had heartbreak with teams that had great shots of winning it. But this team won and I'm so proud of them for we might call it the COVID championship, it might have an asterisk. But it was tougher being down here. In the very beginning I know the NCAA was like, Three weeks. But we stayed in it, we found ways to really enjoy each other and be excited to play.

We're really happy to win this championship.

Q. Specifically on the defensive effort on Aari. She mentioned she thought you guys were more physical in this game compared to the first two. Does that go along with what you were talking about earlier, about the grittiness, trying to be maybe a little bit more physical in this game?

TARA VANDERVEER: I think one of the things, I mean, playing in the Pac-12, we got better as they got better. But in the NCAA tournament, this is very physical. South Carolina is very physical. Louisville is very physical. Missouri State is very physical. So we got more physical as the tournament went on.

Q. Something that doesn't get brought up a whole lot, but I know you certainly appreciate recruiting to Stanford, the academic standards that your recruits have to meet. I'm wondering how much more special maybe that makes it to win a championship at Stanford?

TARA VANDERVEER: My dad told me living Ohio State, don't take the Stanford job, it's a graveyard job. I said, Dad, we just need four and five a year. We're so thankful for the great players that we have, led by Kiana Williams, Anna Wilson, all the way down our lineup.

Top player in high school Haley Jones, the players we

have coming in next year, we're really excited about.

I'm going to enjoy this championship with this team. Yes, they have the academics, but they have more than that. They really have a sisterhood. That's what won it for us.

Q. Are your radio announcers going to get rings?

TARA VANDERVEER: I don't know. I've never thought that far ahead. I hope so, yeah. I hope so.

Q. The real question is, some people would say this would be a time that perhaps you consider retirement, go out on top. I don't get that's the sense you have. Has it even crossed your mind, What more can I do? I just won another national championship. Maybe this would be a time to say, I've had a great career, I've done a lot, maybe it's time to ride into the sunset. Has that crossed your mind at all?

TARA VANDERVEER: Not during the game, but maybe I'll think about it later. Right now I am very excited about what we accomplished, and I'm really excited about the team that we have in that locker room and the young people that are committed to Stanford.

I'm happy. I'm enjoying it. I don't know if I can go through another COVID year, so I hope everybody is wearing their mask. Let's get better so we can get back to normal.

One thing, it was really exciting to have fans at our games. We have missed our fans so much.

Q. We've talked so much this season about how the time on the road benefited your players, how they grew closer and their chemistry improved because of it. As a coach, did it change your relationship with the players at all, if it changed the way you were able to coach them at all?

TARA VANDERVEER: It was kind of interesting, in some ways you're not spending as much time with them because you're not having meals together. You're always being distant. So in some ways, we were more apart. But then just being around each other more. I know the team kind of joked about the fact that we live in a dorm with our coaches. I would say it could go either way.

I'd also like to, for all the participants, I want to thank you for your coverage of women's basketball. We're so thankful for the opportunity to play, for the opportunity to be in this tournament. I just thank you for the NCAA and for running these press conferences so people can share in the joy that our team is experiencing right now.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations. Thank you for your time.

TARA VANDERVEER: Thank you. I've got 600 text messages (smiling).

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