

March 13, 2008



An interview with:

**COACH BLAIR
TAKIA STARKS
MORENIKE ATUNRASE**

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Coach Blair from Texas A&M and Takia Starks. Morenike is behind us.

Coach?

COACH BLAIR: We wanted to press for 10 minutes and see where we were, had a game plan early and we couldn't have gone at that pace for 40 minutes, didn't matter what the score is because this is a three to four-day tournament. You hit and miss on the press.

What you want to do is take Iowa State a little bit out of their offense. They can get very comfortable when they start running their double screens and flare screens like they did yesterday against Kansas State. That was one of the best basketball games I've seen this year, period, men or women.

Both teams should be given a lot of credit, but there's a lot of different ways to play the game. A lot of people say, "My gosh, you're too physical, you're too rough." Folks, you want to go play Tennessee, Connecticut, Rutgers, welcome to the big leagues! If you want to have a chance to go on to the WNBA, you better be able to play a little bit physical.

That's what we have to do. That can win for you. Defense can win for you. These kids are beautiful shooters, too, and they're able to fit into Iowa State's offense because they can shoot the ball off screens, too. What separates these kids and a lot of other kids, we will play defense -- defense first, offense second and rebounds third. Can you get parents to sit there and realize there is a right side of the stat sheet, not just the left side that says "points"?

How about defections, charges, how about assists, how about all those little things? This is what we're made of, this is the way I've been playing for many years. I'm proud of the girls, and

I'm proud of the effort, but I'm also proud of Iowa State for how they came back in the second half and really the last three minutes of the first half.

It could have been blown up to 20, but Lacey did a heck of a job running her ball club. We shutdown Ezell in the first half with a lot of help and a lot of good switching. But Ezell hit a couple in the second half. Lacey kept them in the ballgame and give that kid a lot of credit.

Questions?

THE MODERATOR: We'll take our student athlete questions first.

Q. For both the athletes, when they made their run early on, can y'all talk about Takia, you stepping up and hitting the 3 and Mo, I think you hit three straight shots.

TAKIA STARKS: We made our run, and in this tournament, it's a game of runs. And in our league, it's a game of runs, and we had ours and they made theirs. We just had to hold on to our lead as much as we could, and we knew they were going to hit shots and we had to come afterwards and make shots, too.

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: As for my shots, I knew Takia would hit herself. And when she hits those, she's deadly. She drained them.

Q. Mo, can you talk about the importance of finishing the job Saturday, regardless of what shows up? How important is it for this team and program to clinch a tournament championship?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: It's important to us. This is a place we haven't been in my four years here, so we're excited to be there, but we have to be mentally prepared. Yesterday we only had one day to prepare, a few hours and we did good. I think we were focused. I think it's the same way we have to go into the championship game, whoever we face.

TAKIA STARKS: It's the same for me; two years in a row we missed the boat. This year we're here, and just like Mo said, with the amount of time you have to prepare, we have a day for

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Coach Blair – 03.13.08

whoever wins and whoever shows up to play. They're going to get a good game.

Q. Morenike, I know you had frustration due to injury. Would you say that your play has been related to health? I know you had problems in your feet and legs a little bit. Could you comment?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: Yes, sir. Every athlete has their ups and downs. And with me, all of mine came at one time. This is the first time I've had to face injuries. I have never been injured my entire career, and my coach kept me on my toes about being focused and doing little things, not just rebounding, but doing the little things. So I was just -- I did a good job of that.

Q. T.K., they came out with the box, and one that gave you trouble. And what was different about that tonight? You seemed to get more shots tonight.

TAKIA STARKS: Tonight, me and Coach had a talk about the great game, and he was saying they were going to be 1-3 like last time. And this time, I kept moving and a couple of times I rested, but keep moving and taking whatever screen and whatever crease in the defense I had, and just try to take my time and hit the shots when I was open.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the coach.

COACH BLAIR: The 1-3 was a diamond, and our 1-3 zone is a chaser for you football people.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the final championship, the importance of the program, College Station?

COACH BLAIR: I think it's huge. We're growing as a town, as a program. We'll be in our new practice facilities next year. There will not be anything like that in the Big 12, and we've had a long way to go from being a football school or a soccer school or some of our other sports, but we're growing in everything.

That's the commitment from Bill Byrne and the University. He is more valuable than a lot of us coaches, I'll tell you that right now. Nebraska didn't know what they had when they had him. He is a special man, has a great vision.

He gives us the toys to do what we need to do, and we get out and we recruit and do it mainly with Texas kids and we'll branch out and steal a

kid from Oklahoma or Florida or somewhere else, but there is enough talent in Texas to stay there.

I think when you start looking at the teams, they're playing after us. Reilly is from Texas, and a number of their other kids, Hernandez, it's just a lot of people in this state that want to play good, high quality women's basketball. I think it's very special -- I've never been in a championship game except at Steven F. Austin. Last one was in 1993.

They didn't invite me; Tennessee, Georgia or Vanderbilt usually had it, so I never got to that ballgame. It's new territory for me, and I'm excited just as a kid.

Q. You held Ezell scoreless in the first half. How important was it for her not to get into a rhythm tonight?

COACH BLAIR: Huge. What a performance the last two ballgames. The kid is quality. Coach Schaefer has so much respect for her because she played on the Jones Cup Team that Athletes in Action sponsored this summer. What a class young lady, along with six other kids from the Big 12 conference.

He had so much respect; he kept drilling it and drilling it in their heads, this is who you have to stop. She wasn't getting open 3's. They probably didn't give Gant that one block in front of our bench in the first half.

I don't know if it showed up or not, but she got a lot of it and it was an air ball, and I think that shows you the commitment to contesting shots. That's what we did the whole night. We did a lot of switching and we did a great job on their inbound shots and I thought that was the key.

You have to play team defense when Iowa State runs as much stuff as they do. I thought the other key was, can we stop their time-out plays? Every time there is a time-out, Coach Naysmith is designing something up. And I said, "Oh, no, what does he got this time?" Like that last play he ran against Kansas State and what a guru he is.

Bill and I will have a good time talking about it in Tampa. We're usually on one stool and he's on another. Most of y'all know where that is. (Chuckles.)

Q. Gary, you talked about the first 10 minutes pressing them. How much of that was more about getting out, rattling their cage early, than it was about, you know, trying to see how y'all's press was?



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COACH BLAIR: The press doesn't force as many turnovers as you think. But it creates havoc. The point guard can't be comfortable with the ball. Sometimes somebody else has to bring it up, and Bill got a technical trying to fire his team up. That's what he was trying to do there, fire his team up.

The president is effective, but back in the days at Steven F., I pressed for 40 minutes, not very smart. My kids wore down by the time playoffs showed up, so what I'm doing is spotting it. We'll even have more guards next year that can rotate in and press longer and harder.

Q. Can you talk about Morenike? Two fouls on Franklin, two on Gant, and there is a chance maybe they would come back, but talk about the way Morenike came off the bench and keyed the end of the first half there.

COACH BLAIR: We felt like we were going to need Morenike more than one of our post players, because we thought we were going to see every different form of zone there was.

When I can put four shooters in and move D.G. to the 4 spot, there is an extra shooter. We felt like that's what we were going to have to do. Morenike is beautiful to watch. She is just like a deer out there sometimes. Running through, she is so graceful.

That drive and left-handed layup she made in the first half, that's vintage Morenike. For some of y'all who didn't get a chance to see her her first two years, that's what she was all about. And hopefully there is more basketball for her later, but I don't plan on giving her up for another five, six games, whatever they say I can still play.

Morenike is the key because how many all-conference players would accept that role of coming off the bench? You have to have unselfish kids to be able to say, "Hey, I might be a first-round draft choice for the WNBA, but I'll come off the bench and fill the role you need." That's why she has been a captain since she was a sophomore.

Q. Coach, congratulations.

COACH BLAIR: I appreciate everybody here, Iowa State and the fans. The fans helped make this thing, and Iowa State fans, you spread the word, I would love to have you tomorrow. Okay. I would love to have you against one of those orange teams. Spread the word, stay around. I'm sorry, but we're fixing to go beat your

men right now, okay? (Chuckles.) We're going to try!

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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