



## **2009 Rutgers Women's Basketball Media Day Thursday, Oct. 29, 2009**

### **Rutgers Head Coach C. Vivian Stringer**

#### **Opening statement**

“Good morning, this is going to be an interesting and challenging experience. Without question, it will be good for us as a coaching staff to seriously be challenged and to really make sure we are selecting things that this team can pick up quickly given the limits of experience, which is not a lot. None the less, it challenges us as a team to play the kind of schedule that the Scarlet Knights have always played and that is one that doesn't back down or hide from great competition. It starts right at the beginning with No. 2 Stanford.”

“I know that I personally enjoy coaching this group of young ladies because they are trying to work hard together as a team. I am preparing each time that we come to practice for us to work together to see if we can pick up enough things to get through the games that we have coming. The only problem is it is not like it is a gradual process. Our first game is against a team that played for the national championship. That puts added pressure in terms of adding things and being fully prepared. I think as long as our team remains confident and works everyday to get better, it will be the same kind of results that have always been and that is it doesn't matter how we start, it is just that we have to work really hard together.”

“I am trying to figure out right now what kinds of offenses are best. I tried to approach practice with the understanding that we are going to work more in concepts to allow them to play and not think so much. Even that, is something that can be challenging for all basketball teams not just our own. It means that we have to understand and be smart about situations, scoring, who we get the ball to and what kind of balance we have. Within the offense, we have to see who is going to get the shot and what kind of shot. That is what we have control of. I really would like to see us play more in the concept area so that everybody can play and be comfortable.”

“We need each person to play and be extremely productive given that Myia McCurdy averaged 12 minutes last year, Rashidat Junaid averaged 10 minutes last year and obviously Brittany Ray has started. Short of that, there are no other players averaging any minutes worth talking about – if fact, there are none. We have lost the entire inside and obviously we have lost an extremely productive shooter who can go inside and outside and you could always call on for a shot in any given situation. With that, this is a rather daunting challenge. I personally like challenges. I just have to keep my mind focused on the fact that as long as we try and really work hard every day and give the effort then I feel that we are learning because we can't afford to drop our heads and be frustrated. That always happens but I always knew we had someone in our group that could bail us out. We don't have anyone like that. We have to be the best team that Rutgers has ever had in order for us to survive this schedule – the best team. That means we have to be the most sensitive, the one that is going to make the extra pass, the one that understands the game and the one that only has people that are thinking about 'what do we do as a team?' Do we rebound as a team? Do we play great defense as a team? Do we communicate as a team? Because we can't say 'my bad.' We can't say it once because we can't overcome that. We have to be a total team.”

“What is great about this group is that they do care for each other. They do, in my opinion, have better chemistry than any of the other teams. They have a great deal of pride. They don't want to look bad. It is our intention to protect them until they are ready to fight on their own. I have no doubt that we will ultimately be where we need to be. I just want to remind myself and us as a coaching staff not to get frustrated. My experience tells me, as long as we have the right attitude, we do the right

things and we work – this group for example was the first group that had all their players pass the skills test - that is major. It is not that we are going to be out of condition or anything like that. We just have to work to get better. I trust that we will. I almost want to write a diary because I do think at the end it will be something we as a coaching staff feel to be our greatest work. You guys (media) will have a lot of things to write about during that time. I will just remind you of what I have said now – if what I said now continues to be, then we will be fine and I will be happy.”

### **On if Brittany Ray can be the ‘go-to player’.**

“It is obvious that Brittany will need to be a go-to person. That is a little different set of clothes that she wears now. She was one that we could go to before but we clearly could go inside and call inside pattern and get it to Kia Vaughn. We knew if Kia was doubled then Heather (Zurich) could knock down that shot from the outside. She was just as experienced. Obviously, Epiphanny (Prince) was considered the best clutch player in the country. She had proven that a thousand times. She was there if there was a last-second mess up and someone needed to step up. Much like Diana Taurasi was for Connecticut, Epiphanny was to us. Brittany was a part of the team. This time, we still can’t put that strain on her.”

“I think the freshmen that are now sophomores have learned a lot. They have stepped in, working hard, staying focused and know that they could have contributed more and are contributing a lot more this year. It can’t be Brittany. We all have to share the responsibility. The freshmen can’t hide. The freshmen have to hold themselves accountable. That is why I said in order for us to be successful it is not such a thing as when Kia Vaughn first came she made a statement that she didn’t have to perform because she had a chance to grow because she had people like Matee Ajavon and Cappie Pondexter. Having great players around her didn’t strain her and she felt that she could ease into it. What she didn’t realize was in order for us to reach the highest of heights she needed to perform. I caught a hold of that and pushed her. She made a big difference as a freshman but there is no question there is no such thing as freshmen and there is no point in talking about it. We have to have major contributions from Erica (Wheeler), Christine (Huber) and Mo (Oliver). We have to have major contributions from them. We have to play hard against each other. As much as they like each other they have to compete seriously and compete every day.”

“My challenge to our team is that we have personal goals. One, to be mentally focused because if a team can blow us out mentally then everybody will enjoy hunting us. We are going to be the hunted. There is a big difference between being the hunter and the hunted. It is kind of interesting because I feel like we have a delicate balance to push them to the point where they are able to respond in a positive way and with attitude about how they play and what they represent – the Scarlet Knights. So many teams for so many years have been beaten. Rutgers has the second-longest streak of playing in the Sweet Sixteen of all the teams in the country. If you think that any of the schools, including the BIG EAST schools, are happy with that they aren’t. They see this as a very vulnerable team. They will basically blow us out anytime that they can if we don’t play with an attitude and a survival instinct every time we play. Whether we play Duquesne, Siena or Fairleigh Dickinson it doesn’t matter. Everybody will be looking to get their hits. They will try to knock us out. If we don’t understand that, then we are going to wake up with a lot of bruises and a lot of people will be able to get on us - for old and new.”

“I trust that by the time we do step up to the plate to play that we will be mentally tough. When I see a team member drop their head when I say something to them then I am upset because I know that she is not tough enough to get it done. When you go to hostile crowds against teams who enjoy blowing you out and laughing there is a different kind of mentality. I have so much pride that I can’t handle that. I trust that we have that same kind of pride. It is not about me, it is about each of us as individuals and what kind of pride we have. To know that and trust ourselves enough to know that we are going to be OK. Not one person can do it. Everybody has to fight. Just that we had a mistake that’s fine. Basketball is a game of mistakes. Whatever it is, we have to be determined. Whether we are in a press and they get past us in a press then we can’t drop our heads. We have to get an attitude and get back there and slow it down because this is the way the Scarlet Knights play. We don’t know how to play; at least I don’t know how to coach people other than ones that play with a great deal of pride and confidence. I think that we as a coaching staff are looking. I don’t want to destroy the confidence. It is a tough one because I still know that we need to be tough mentally yet how do I push them to the point where no one threatens them or makes them blink and they are ready to play? For them to be mature enough to know that the purpose of it is to prepare them for the competition and in the end that they will smile and laugh.”

“If I or we as a coaching staff find ourselves patronizing things that are less than excellent than we are doing nothing but preparing them for failure. It is much like any coach or a mom who doesn’t reprimand the child when they need to do something. If we have been there and know what has to happen then we can’t afford to just hug and say everything is OK because it is not OK. We can’t miss layups, we can’t make those kinds of passes and we have to comminute with each other. It is going to be a good challenge for me because I will find a way. I am just trying to find what the makeup of this group is because we cannot be fragile – not this team.”

“We have to be tough as nails. That is a fact. You guys (media) will be writing and talk about how it is mental and it is. It is mental. We can either have a giant or a mental midget. We have to decide which way we want to be. We don’t have time for it. If we are explaining, for example, that something is going wrong than don’t take it personal. It was done wrong and you can’t have a conversation about it because what you are doing is asking me or the coaching staff to accept mediocrity or failure. The great players don’t do that. The great teams don’t do that. They don’t have anything to say. We don’t have all this wasted time, let’s just get it done – period. Let’s get it done. Nothing has been clearer than the fact that you are going to play the No. 2 team in the country – period. The best reflection of that is when you saw us get beat by Duke by 40 points. I didn’t let up. I was angry because I don’t want to see my team ever get embarrassed. I really don’t. I want them to be proud of who they are and what they represent with what they are trying to do. There is so much in my heart and mind about this game and what it says. To the credit of the team, rather than be discouraged, they became more determined and more of a fight. It was never going to be a short quick battle. It was going to be a series of battles throughout. It is a journey. There is nothing quick about what has to be done. It takes time as does all things. It is through time that you prove your medal. Everybody can look up and do something once right but the consistency of that is what is going to be important to us. If we can sustain the mental giant that we must be, not midgets, in the face of a lot of adversity we have to be far more confident in ourselves. If we can hang in there that way, then we can enjoy the fruits of the labor that is about to take place.”

**On hearing her say “I enjoy coaching this team” for the first time in a while.**

“You haven’t heard that from me in a couple years because I haven’t said it. You can coach a team but it doesn’t mean that you really enjoy it because there are too many other issues that are off the floor that you don’t see. I am comfortable around them because I don’t think that they are going to say anything that causes me to reprimand them. I won’t accept anything other than who they have to be. They are the kind of players that say ‘let’s go have some coffee’ or ‘let’s go have a sandwich’ or ‘come over to the house.’ I just feel comfortable around them. I think that they generally want to know. I know that. It is not that I really haven’t enjoyed all of my players as individuals. If I didn’t, they wouldn’t be here. Honestly. I just feel more comfortable. I like this team. I think they have great potential as long as they don’t get an attitude with each other or give up on each other. I think that strength wise we can prove something. I have never been in that position. I have always had the great guard that can get it done or the outstanding center. There is always somebody that has a name or reputation. I really like this challenge because we have a real chance to prove what it means to be the ultimate team. The ultimate team. That is what I am talking about.”

**On if April Sykes, who was highly recruited in high school, is ready to be that great player to step up when needed.**

“I am not trying to put that on April but I will say this – Khadijah scored a lot of points as well (in high school). They haven’t been placed in a position like that on this stage. I am not trying to do that. I am trying to see if we can have the best team that we have ever coached and that they have ever been. I would like for us to say that we have been the best team. Keep in mind what I consider the best. The best and most successful doesn’t always qualify it in terms of wins and losses. The best is getting the most from each person who is giving the most for the sake of the team. They are going to see the extra pass and do the things that a team does. A team isn’t going to count one or two people to rebound. They are going to be conscious of the passes. That is why I said I am working in concepts so they can be free to play the game. Within this group, each and every person can do some special things. I just want to be able to get the max out of each person. When Epiphanny (Prince) came, I wasn’t looking for Epiphanny to be the star. I was never looking for that and she wasn’t either. She wasn’t looking for that either. Cappie Pondexter wasn’t looking for that either. They really weren’t. Essence (Carson) and Matee (Ajavon) did what they needed to and what needed them to do as a team. Their roles were no more important than anyone else. For example, it would not have been acceptable for Ajavon to be the ‘go-to player’ if she didn’t play defense or do all the other things that we encouraged as a team. Epiphanny was never just trying to be offense. Epiphanny was playing great defense. I don’t need a one-man show. What I am trying to do is coach a team. We didn’t coach, for example, Usha Gilmore to be

drafted by Indiana. It wasn't because we ran the ball to her. We had a better shooter in Shawnetta Stewart. As a result, Shawnetta scored a lot more points yet Usha was drafted in the first round. What I am saying is, we don't come in here to create a stage for the WNBA. I think our program has enough respect across the country that all we have to do as a team is to do the right thing to make us successful with non one trying to be the star. We are not looking for one and never have. Each person will emerge. Does Essence get more credit with what she does than someone else? No, because she does what she needs to do. She rebounds and shoots the ball deep into the corner. She dribbles and she kicks. If the screen isn't set or if the pass isn't made and all those things don't take place as a team, then we are not successful. April can just shoot the ball. April could shoot the ball as well as anyone in the nation. If April didn't play defense, make passes rebound or do the other things that she needs to do then she wouldn't be out there. No one would. I wish we had more time to prepare but I like the challenge we have as a coaching staff – to be the ultimate team.”

“The fact that Brittany Ray shoots the ball well isn't any more important than what maybe Nikki Speed's job is to deliver the pass or Erica's job to make a pass and help create. That is what point guards do. They are sensitive to who is on the floor and take pride in delivering. They always take care of movement of the ball first. They take any shot that is relied on secondly. Is that any more or any less? If Rashidat (Junaid) doesn't set screens to get the guards open in the first place then she is not going to get it. Those are the things I am talking about with the 'we skills'. The 'we skills' are passing, better defense and rebounding. We have to be better at all those things. We have to be smarter. We have to take advantage of the layups. We have to recognize how you play this game and how balance it has to be going inside and going outside.”

“Monique Oliver has as good of credentials as any. In fact, she will come in more skilled than Kia Vaughn was coming into the inside. Is she ready right now? No, but she will be. Is Christine (Huber) ready to do the things that Heather (Zurich) did? No but I think that she will be able to. I say that because she has the height but there are a lot she has to learn. I see who they are and I see what they can be.”

“Erica (Wheeler) has one of the prettiest jumpers that you would see. She is hesitant right now because she doesn't know yet what she has to do and how she has to do it. Right now, a lot of times all the players are finding that the weaknesses that they have are being exposed. You can't be fragile about that; you just have to get better.”

“Chelsey Lee comes in far more vocal. When we recruited her, we realized she had a tremendous amount of upside. We are beginning to see it. She realizes she has to step up and help in the inside. Kia (Vaughn) is gone - she is in Israel making money. So she says 'What can I do? How can I be tougher? What can I do better?' I see that. Maybe last year they could a few things and it would be OK. This year, they are more vocal and challenging themselves more. That is what we are going to continue to need from each of them. I can't say enough about what we can do. We have a serious challenge and there are a lot of things we don't know.”

### **On Loss of Epiphanny Prince- have you felt it yet?**

I don't think there is an easy way to determine her loss because she was a great player. She not only played offense, she played outstanding defense. She did what she needed to do, she didn't cheat in practice. She worked hard. I am not surprised of the loss, it's a big void but that's where I am saying we are not trying to replace any one person. I am sure she felt overwhelmed when the statement for her coming in was 'can you fill in the shoes of Cappie Pondexter or Matee Ajavon or an Essence Carson.' I'm not asking anyone to be them. I just need each person to be the best they can be and to trust (that) if I am pushing you really hard then I know you have it within yourself. I am not trying to break you, but I am trying to make you tougher. The loss of Epiphanny is huge. Like I said, she was the number one clutch player in the country. If there is a breakdown and you've got two or three seconds left. When she puts her hands on the ball, somehow, somehow, whether it's a drive or something that breaks people's ankles and pulls up on the jumper or there is a three or four. Epiphanny with her hands and with her talent could determine the outcome of a game by herself. And there are few people in this country that can do that so how do you measure that, you don't. You have Diana Taurasi and Maya Moore; they are not going to be replaced like that. You would think you couldn't replace other great players like Cappie, Essence or Matee. This is what it is all about. A young group comes up and they look forward to the challenge that is there and the most important thing and if I can't emphasize it enough is that each person is the best player that they can possibly be. They don't set limitations on themselves and they accept the challenge that we give them as coaches. If you start to make excuses then why don't you just fade off.

Just do what I am asking you to do, it's not foreign. Epiphanny is a great loss and we didn't have time to recover. By the time we found out, we couldn't even bring another person in. So that is not a comfortable position to be placed in and it doesn't change our schedule or anything else. It is what it is and we can't spend any time worrying about it. We will have a great team of 10 and the end, only I can make the judgment that we have fulfilled our destiny and who we need to be as a team. I am looking forward to that challenge and am excited about it."

**On progress of guard Khadijah Rushdan at the end of season, options for this season- will she be the point.**

"Khadijah was playing her best basketball toward the end of the season. She was the point guard we needed her to be. Without question, we struggled at the beginning because, again, I can be pretty tough on our point guards but I thought she really embraced it and she knew what she needed to do to get everyone involved. When things broken down or when something was called on her, she began to feel the game and recognize time situations. I think maybe initially she had some reservations about well, 'what are they talking about' but when she found herself sitting and she wasn't playing then she understood this is the way we are going to play this game. She never looked back. I considered and am still considering moving her into that spot where Epiphanny was because she is capable of tight dribbles and pulling up and taking the jump shot, as well as getting to the hole. The thing about it is we need a much quicker shot so that concerns me a little bit. We need to decide if we are going to let Khadijah play where she has and is already comfortable, knowing that she knows the tempo and does understand that role and let her do that because she is doing that extremely well. That means we have count on someone else to be in that scoring position, that one that has many ways to hurt you. That is what Epiphanny did. No doubt Khadijah will be playing the point and the two (guard). I think anyone is a point can also be that as a two because of their handles. We have to find out where everyone is going to be most effective. Could we move Brittany to that, yes, but I am concerned because she has shot the ball so well in certain ways that why would I make her put the ball down all the time to get to those shots. Could April? She could. I need someone that can hit the gap very hard, find that hole, find that player that's out there and take that shot. Step out and quickly and take that three, put it down and break ankles. That player has not been defined yet. And if we don't have it, that's fine. We will make the best and play the game we need to play. Everyone will contribute in their own way."

## **Rutgers Student-Athletes**

### **#43 Senior Rashidat Junaid, Center**

**On preparing for this season:**

"I trained all summer and I think I am ready for this season. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to play against Kia (Vaughn) for two years. I learned a lot from her. I am prepared. I do have a lot on my shoulders – filling Kia's shoes is a big responsibility. But I am confident that I worked hard this summer and I will be ready to get out there."

**On being an emotional leader:**

"I am willing to do anything to help this team. If the team needs me to step up and be the emotional leader, I will do that. I am willing to do anything to help us win. This is my last year. We have come close so many times and I want to leave here with a National Championship"

**On playing a tough schedule and starting with No. 2 Stanford:**

"Stanford is a great team. I am excited because it gives us the opportunity to see where we are at. Coach Stringer always says, 'It's not about how we start, it is about how we finish.' I like it when we play top teams in the beginning because it gives us a chance to see where we are at. At the end, we will see how much we have progressed. I think playing Stanford will serve as a measuring stick of where we can be."

### **#1 R-Sophomore Khadijah Rushdan, Guard**

**On the upcoming season:**

“I am looking forward to playing with this team, because we have great chemistry. We lost a lot, but we have a lot of good players and a lot of good freshmen. We have a good mix of players. I think it is going to be a different look, but I am excited to see how we come together.

**On stepping into a new role this season:**

“In general, I think Coach Stringer wants me to be a leader, be vocal and try to run the team when I need to. This season, I think I am going to have to score more. We lost a lot with Heather (Zurich), Kia (Vaughn), and Piph (Prince), so I am going to have to be more assertive on offense.”

**On offseason work:**

“I worked a lot on my shooting. Everyone knows that I can drive hard to the basket and pass the ball, but one thing I was lacking was being a consistent shooter.”

**On most difficult challenge of this season:**

“I think the hardest part about this season will be accepting the fact that we have a different team. We lost a lot, and we weren’t necessarily prepared to lose Piph, so I think just coming together and understanding that this is going to take a whole team effort. We don’t have someone, like Coach said, to bail us out all the time. We have to cope with that fact. We have to understand and realize that we can be good, and we are good, we just have to buy into the team concept. “

**#24 Senior Myia McCurdy, Forward**

**On upcoming season:**

“I am very excited for the season to start, mainly because this is a different year. We don’t have a go-to scorer and everyone has to contribute. I think it is going to be a great year because we have all stepped up and we have been working hard. We are ready to play.”

**On playing a different role this year:**

“My role changed because I have to play the three and four positions. I have to know the guard spot and I have to know the forward spot. I have to take on a lot more now, because I am so used to just playing the forward position. Being a guard for Coach Stringer is totally different. Before it was easier, but now, I have to flex in and out and my responsibility has increased.”

**On goals this season:**

“For myself, I want to be confident, and stay confident at all times and be positive. I need to know that I can do it. If I make a mistake, or get a turnover, I have to just stay confident. As a team, we need to work hard and compete every day. If we can do that, we will be fine.”

**#35 Senior Brittany Ray, Guard**

**On upcoming season:**

“This is my last year here, and I have had three wonderful years, playing with great people such as Essence Carson, Matee Ajavon, Kia Vaughn, and Epiphanny Prince. I am just excited and anxious for the year to start. We are a very young team, and, as Coach Stringer said, not everyone has the experience or the minutes that we are used to coming into the season. I think it is going to be an interesting year and I’m excited to see how we grow as a team.”

**On playing a new role this season:**

“I think I have to be much more of a vocal leader this year. Last year, I looked to Kia and Heather (Zurich) more because they were our leaders. This year, I am put in a position where I have to be the leader because I have the most experience. I have to be a floor general for Coach Stringer because sometimes what she says is not being translated to my teammates, so I have to put it in perspective – from my point of view – so that my teammates can understand. I have to be willing to talk to them more and be willing to be another teacher on the court.”

**On getting the freshmen up to speed:**

“It is very important. They are being thrown into the fire immediately. I just think that they will get better with time and it is just a matter of them learning and absorbing everything that Coach Stringer has to offer them. As a leader, I will make sure they stay on top of things. They just need to stay focused and make sure they bring intensity to practice every day.”