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An interview with:

UL Lafayette

THE MODERATOR: Here from Louisiana-Lafayette we have Head Coach Michael Lotief, Christina Hamilton, Natalie Fernandez and Lexie Elkins. We will begin with an opening statement.

COACH LOTIEF: I spoke with our NCAA reps. What an awesome event. The improvements and the changes and the energy surrounding our sport now is really phenomenal.

It's better than it's ever been, and it's because we've got people on the frontline every day fighting for this sport, fighting for opportunities for female athletes, fighting for equity, and it's getting better. Are we there yet? No, but we're making progress.

This was really -- it was a phenomenal experience. Every little girl ought to have a chance to experience this. I'm proud of my kids. I'm so proud of my kids. I'm proud of, first of all, who they are. And in y'all's world it's about what they do or whether they win or not, but in my world and my life it's about who they are and how they do it.

These kids are winners. They're winners in how they go about their business day-by-day, they're winners at how they care and love each other and fight for each other. They're winners in how they take care of their business in the classroom. They're winners in their values and how they, too, want to make a difference and impact this world.

We didn't play our best softball the last couple of times. Sure that's something to do with the venue, sure that's something to do with the opponents, sure that's something to do with a crazy coach. But our kids made us proud, and it's been a magical, phenomenal year. I'm proud of

our fan base, proud of Lafayette, Louisiana. The Cajun people stood behind these people and believed in them and loved them and supported them and cared for them.

It's always tough when your season ends, because our dream is to hold that trophy. But when we look back and we gain some perspective on how we've learned and grown throughout this season, and because of this season, we're going to be proud.

Q. Christina, you had a great effort out there, but you -- just tell me about that inside-the-park home run that was the one that -- straw that broke the camel's back for you all. Talk about how that one got away.

CHRISTINA HAMILTON: I felt like she put the bat on the ball and got a good shot and got lucky, honestly. She got around all the bases.

Q. Obviously not the weekend you guys wanted. Was it the way teams were attacking you guys at the plate or was it y'all's approach? This is an outlier of what you had done all year, so I'm curious what do you think the root cause might have been?

LEXIE ELKINS: I don't think it was the way they were going at us. We trusted our preparation and trusted what we learned. Just like with Kentucky, it wasn't our game. Things weren't going our way mentally or physically. We weren't altered by anything; it just wasn't our game.

Q. Natalie, just going back and reflecting, it hasn't been much time, but looking back at your career and how it's come together here, how do you reflect on this season and what it's done for the program considering what people thought would happen this year?

NATALIE FERNANDEZ: I mean, I've said it all along this team is special. We got together in the beginning and we decided to take a risk that all 27 of us were going to go "all in" every pitch. We were going to compete and not only compete, but

compete for each other and fight for each other, and we did that.

I think what makes this season and this team so special is we stayed together as a team. You know, we have a very strong bond as a sisterhood, and looking back that's what makes it so special.

Q. Christina, in the fifth and sixth innings you were noticeably on the field trying to cheer on the offense and things. Talk about what you were telling the batters at the time and with the offense struggling, it's not normal for you. Was there frustrations setting in for you in the circle?

COACH LOTIEF: She was talking to the hitters? Maybe that was the problem. (Laughter).

CHRISTINA HAMILTON: I don't really feel like there was any frustration. I mean, I trust my hitters and the defense and I trust that we're going to get the job done. So I was just talking to them, goofing around like I always do, telling them Coach Mike is crazy and just hit the ball.

Q. Coach, the team struggled with runners on base. Tell me first off, what happened? There was a strategy that didn't work for you guys and also talk about the change with bases loaded and one out, seemed like that was your best opportunity to get a run and you couldn't.

COACH LOTIEF: You watched us all year long, right? You have watched this team all year long. And we played a three-game series against Oklahoma. It was against the same pitcher, the same moments, the same time. You're talking about four-tenths of a second. You're talking about some of those balls missed by a quarter of an inch.

I mean, it's not fair -- the skill of the sport and the execution of the sport. It's not fair to expect -- these kids on the biggest stage in the biggest moment want to do their best. There is no question about it. Our game is not geared for calling a timeout and running the ball off tackle and you're stronger than them and you run over them. Or you call a timeout and you play into the post guy because he's got a mismatch. That's not how it works. A quarter of an inch, fraction of a second.

We never got in our rhythm, but we weren't miserably off. It was a quarter of an inch here and a fraction of a second here. Our kids competed. You have some good teams here and more times than not you're playing a tough sport.

I'm proud of my kids and we're not going to go back and -- I'm going to let y'all do that and figure out what happened and put labels on, whatever, and who did this or that. I know what I saw and how hard they worked and how hard that they prepared and how good this team is and how hard they fight. That's the story to me, what that kid (Fernandez) just said about this team. If you didn't watch them in the fall, some of y'all never watched them in the fall. We looked like the "Bad News Bears." We couldn't throw and catch, couldn't hit the ball; and for them to end up where they have ended up has taken an incredible amount of hard work and sacrifice.

These kids have passion and love of each other and love of the sport and they played hard. There is nothing wrong with saying you came up short. Like she said, we got here, we decided to take a risk and we came up short.

Q. Obviously getting here, you have a good group of players that are returning. Talk about the core group that is going to be leaving and talk about the group that you have returning as well.

COACH LOTIEF: And that's the next fallacy that goes out there. Last year at this point, who was sitting here? The Washington Huskies were sitting here and they had no upperclassmen on their team. Everybody said because they're here they're going to come back over and over and over. That's an assumption; because you have a young team that you're going to come back here and do it over and over. Wrong. Bad assumption.

These kids are -- there are going to be people leaving, some coming in and that group of kids is going to have to figure out how they form relationships together and is going have to get some breaks, develop relationships. They're going to have to get back to the base of the mountain and do some work. You don't get here just because you were here the year before.

In fact, in most sports it's harder to come back and it's harder to repeat. That's a tough journey because of the emotional energy that these kids expend.

Next year -- we're going to go fishing for a couple of weeks before we recommit to that journey and start coordinating them again.

Q. This is for Lexie and Christina. It seemed like after the first couple runs they put

on the board you settled down, did a nice job navigating around trouble. What was different in what you all did today and making them have to adjust and stay off kilter a little bit until the 7th inning?

CHRISTINA HAMILTON: What was different from what?

Q. From playing Kentucky.

CHRISTINA HAMILTON: Oh. I think we came out more aggressive this game and attacking spots a little bit better. Just a little bit, not really a whole lot. We were definitely more aggressive toward batters. Coach Mike came and talked to me in the middle of the inning and was like, "Look, you don't have to be perfect. We ain't been perfect all year. Calm down and play free." And after that it was easier to settle town and chillax.

Q. Congratulations, ladies. I wanted to get you to weigh in on the ride that was this year and give us a feel for if you enjoyed it.

NATALIE FERNANDEZ: I mean, yeah, we enjoyed it. I'm going to go back to the sisterhood talk. That's what this journey taught me the most about; sticking with your sisters through the good and the bad. We have gone through adversity that some outsiders didn't know about, but we got through it together.

I don't know. That's what I'm going to take from this experience is the chemistry that this team has. And not just this team, but all of my seasons in the past. But this season has been so special, and I'm going to keep saying that.

LEXIE ELKINS: I think how mentally tough we are and the adversity that we faced. At the beginning, everyone was there with open arms and was willing to help me. I think it rubbed off on everybody. Everybody was there for each other, and we all had faith in each other the entire year.

CHRISTINA HAMILTON: It was an exciting and eventful year, I think. When you get a group of girls together like this who bond and fight for each other, truly fight for each other and go through the struggles that we have been through and overcome it and get stronger as a group, it's an exciting journey to be on. I'm so glad, so glad I got to go on this journey with this group of girls because I wouldn't want to be on it with anybody else. I don't know what else to say. You're going to miss the seniors who are here influencing us, but hopefully, you know, the girls who are here learned from them and can influence the girls next

year. But this year it was just amazing. It was special.

Q. Lexie and Christina, what can you take away from the past couple of days, whether it's how you prepare or just the stuff around the games here. What do you take away that you feel will linger on through the off season and give you guys something to build on when you have to try and come back and make this all work again next fall?

LEXIE ELKINS: Coach was talking about how last year it stung but he got over it. This year is going to sting. It is going to sting this year so thinking about it is going to be hard, But eventually we're going to come to a point where we're going to sit there and think about it, but not in a negative manner. We're going to take the struggles that we went through. We went and put ourselves up on a stage, and we were shown what we needed to work on. We're going to take it and learn from it and grow. And next year we're going to use this to get better, you know?

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody.

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