

Women's Basketball Invitation Tournament: Penn State vs Villanova

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Penn State Nittany Lions

Carolyn Kieger

Ashley Owusu

Makenna Marisa

Leilani Kanipus

Semifinal Press Conference

CAROLYN KIEGER: First of all, I just want to thank the committee and the Wbit and the NCAA. What an amazing event so far. Great welcoming committee yesterday. Thought it was really great for our team to have that atmosphere as we continue to build. So I just want to thank everybody. I thought it's been a first-class event so far.

Obviously congratulate the other participants in this tournament. Just want to say how proud I am of this team. This group, they love each other. They love competing with each other. They don't want the season to end. They have a chip on their shoulder. Something to prove.

Phenomenal to be able to travel to Hinkle Fieldhouse, iconic building are for them to play in. Great experience for them and I think we are looking forward to play Villanova, who is obviously a really great program, always have been.

So much respect for Villanova and what Harry and Denise have built and continue to build. Big fan of them. Always have been, obviously being in the BIG EAST for a long time. Excited to play them in this historic building.

Q. Not only a postseason berth but the inaugural WBIT, is that something you all talk about in terms of trying to be the first champion of this event?

ASHLEY OWUSU: For sure. As soon as we found out that we would be participating in it, I think we made it our business to really focus in and really hone in and talk about how we wanted to be champions at the end of the tournament.



LEILANI KANIPUS: Yeah, we definitely talked about that. Obviously a great opportunity and a great chance to keep playing in March, so playing basketball. So, yeah.

MAKENNA MARISA: Like you said, to be the first-ever champions of the WBIT would be really cool and awesome, and we are just excited to keep playing with each other.

Q. You all have won six out of seven recently after a six-game losing streak. What's been the biggest change of the last month of y'all's season after that portion of it?

MAKENNA MARISA: It was a rough stretch for us but that's how basketball goes sometimes. It's a roller coaster of a season, and we just had to get ourselves together. Had to get ourselves together in practice. Push each other. Remind ourselves who we are and find our identity again, and that's kind of what we did and obviously we have been playing some of our best basketball since then.

Q. Ashley, any thoughts on that?

ASHLEY OWUSU: Piggyback off what Makenna said, we won six games in a row; we lost six games in a row, and we are that same team. So I just think our mindset, especially going into postseason, postseason is a whole new season. So just staying locked in and ready to play every single game.

THE MODERATOR: What has this extra time together meant for you guys, and what do you hope will help build for the future with this experience?

ASHLEY OWUSU: Personally for me, it's meant everything. Obviously I missed a good chunk of the first part of the season. So be able to come in and play with my teammates in the postseason has meant everything to me.

LEILANI KANIPUS: More basketball with my best friends. So that's always great. And also, we always talk about leaving the jersey in a better place. So setting this program up for next year, and just trying to be better for the people ahead of us.



MAKENNA MARISA: Yeah, kind of to piggyback off what they said, I love playing with this team, and I know we all love playing with each other. So just an opportunity to do that and play in March, which is something I've never experienced. So it's been really cool.

And then like Lei said, too, leaving the jersey in a better place. Like this is my last year, so that's kind of always been my hope. And you know, winning this tournament would absolutely be doing that for the people that are behind us.

Q. For the players and the coach, I'm curious what it's been like for you to be part of this explosion of popularity for women's basketball this season, and have you seen this continued through the WBIT? Have you seen the kind of fervor that other teams have seen through the postseason?

CAROLYN KIEGER: I'll start with answering that. I think women's basketball has always had an amazing product, and now when we talk about the explosion, I think what's exploding is that they are putting us on TV. There's always been amazing players. There's always been generational players from way back when.

But now when you put us on TV and show the product and how amazing these young women are, not only our team but across the country, it shows that fans are interested in it.

So I don't know if the game is exploding. It's always been exploding. There's always been amazing players. There's always been phenomenal teams. There's always been phenomenal coaches and there's always been amazing players. But now I think the media is covering us more, and it's showing wonders, and these ladies deserve to be celebrated.

MAKENNA MARISA: Yeah, I think off what Coach Kieger said, there's always been amazing players and talent, but just with media and technology, always expanding, always growing, always more, you know, apps and stuff coming out. Like just the media coverage has been more, which we're fortunate with that, and there's also some down sides to it, too, I would have to argue.

But yeah, I think that's why the woman's game, we're really starting to see it grow more is because the coverage. It's awesome. It's been amazing to experience. So we are really thankful for that.

LEILANI KANIPUS: I feel like they hit it on the head.

Q. Ashley, you've played a lot of basketball in your career, and you mentioned you know, missing the first part of the season and finally getting to play now. What has this experience been like down the stretch, being at Penn State and having this sort of success? What has this meant to you?

ASHLEY OWUSU: It's been amazing. It's meant the world to me being able to come in and just be around so many great people that care about me on and off the court, and it's been exciting. I'm excited to keep playing with my teammates and keep being around the coaching staff.

Q. (What are you most proud of this season that you've improved on)?

LEILANI KANIPUS: I'd say my coach is big on me getting to my kill-spot pullup more lately. I've been trying to fine tune that and make that more efficient in my game. I'd say I'm actually more proud of listening to her and taking the shot.

Q. Same question I had for the players. Winning six out of the last seven, I believe, after a stretch that was probably a little bit more difficult, after a stretch that was six in a row, the result swings, what have you attributed that to, and what are you all doing really well now that maybe wasn't there earlier?

CAROLYN KIEGER: Well, I think, Makenna said it perfectly, that we had to re-find our identity. We had to find ourselves again. Obviously we won six games in a row with our full strength roster, which we only had during those six games. We lose Taylor Valladay, who was playing like an All-American, playing like an All-Conference performer from that point guard spot; and I think when we lost her, not only was it an emotional loss, but it was a huge, you know, just momentum shift for us, and we had to find ourselves again.

We had to get that confidence back. You know, we had to re-find our identity as a group. Who was going to step up in a different role. Unfortunately it took us six games to get there but I'm really proud of our team's resiliency, fighting through that, figuring out who we were with different people playing the point, different lineups that we've shifted around.

So I think this group, if anything, they are learning how to win. And when you come in and you take over a program and you have a vision of where we want to go, and we want to put this program back to a national stage, to a national providence and we knew it was going to not happen overnight. We knew we were going to have to do it brick-by-brick, and we wanted to do it the right and a we

wanted to do it with a culture that would last. We didn't want to be a one-hit wonder.

We wanted to build a culture that could be at the top of the Big Ten for a long time. I think this group has really done that and they have bought into doing it culturally. They have bought into doing it with each other. And this postseason, this opportunity to play in the WBIT is setting us up for the future. Already getting three elite games, George Mason, Belmont and Mississippi State, I have a tremendous amount of respect for their programs and what their coaches are doing, and our team has had to play three different styles against them.

I think this is just going to do wonders as we propel this program forward, but I'm just really proud of their resiliency, their toughness, their chemistry and their love for Penn State and their love for each other, and I just think it speaks volumes how focused we are right now going into this tournament and having that chip on our shoulder.

Q. You talked about the respect you have for Villanova. Obviously you know that program well from previous meetings in the BIG EAST. But what are some keys for tomorrow that you all really need to do to be successful?

CAROLYN KIEGER: Well, first of all, Lucy Olsen, have to give her her credit. She is playing phenomenally. She is an elite scorer, not only from the mid-range but three-level scorer. Her teammates do a great job getting her the ball. Villanova's offense, it's hard to guard. Obviously you need to understand the motion concepts and how to jump to the ball and cut cutters and rebound aware of personnel.

So we've got to be really locked in defensively. Got to know where Lucy is at all times. Obviously have to keep Dalce off the boards. Phenomenal offensive rebounder. Top 1 percent in the country at what she does. I just have a lot of respect for how they play off each other and how they share the basketball and how they take care of the basketball. They have always been such an amazing team at controlling pace, and taking care of the basketball.

So we need to get it up to our speed, our tempo and make it a game in the 80s, in the 90s, and play our pace.

Q. With Ashley, having her for the second half of the season what has she brought to the team and what is it like to coach someone at that stage of their career who came in pretty accomplished?

CAROLYN KIEGER: First of all, Ashley has done such a good job coming in and keeping her head. Keeping her emotions. What she's been through and how to handle

that, she's handled it like a pro. She's handled it like a vet, she's handled it like an amazing teammate.

And then coming back in and just having her composure, I think has really helped our team. You know, when you watch Ashley play, you can just see how the game slows down for her, and I think for our team that was really important.

We have a lot of elite guards. We have a lot of different weapons, versatility wise but when Ashley came in, I think the game just stops. She plays two passes ahead. She calms every one of her teammates down and she brings that confidence and this composure to our team needed, as a vet, as somebody who has played deep into March before, I think that's the biggest thing she's brought to us and obviously her vision and her passing ability. You can talk about her scoring, her mid-range, but she is a phenomenal passer and has next-level vision.

THE MODERATOR: Let's talk about the Big Ten a little bit and how it's prepared you for this. You have a lot of teams in the various postseason events that are still playing and a lot of teams that have really kind of made a statement a little bit with some of the games that they have had. What do you see from the Big Ten that has really helped you prepare for this postseason?

CAROLYN KIEGER: Well, the depth, first of all. I mean, from top to bottom, the Big Ten is the best or one of the best conferences in America. Every single night, you have to prepare. Every single night, you have to be on your A Game. That's from the coaching staff down to our practice players, right. Everybody has to be locked in.

And just so much respect for what the Big Ten has done and will continue to do, obviously into the future now with adding the Titans on the West Coast. But a lot of respect for these coaches in the Big Ten and the players. So many phenomenal pros and first-teamers and second-teamers. Even you look at our rosters, there's just so much talent.

You look at a team like Illinois, who is obviously doing phenomenal in this tournament, too. They could be an NCAA Tournament team. We could be an NCAA Tournament team. You look top to bottom, what Iowa is doing; what Iowa has continued to do. Indiana's game against South Carolina, I mean, they pushed them to the wire.

I just think this conference is going to continue to get better and better, and it's fun every night to go up against some of the best coaches and players in the country.

Q. (Do you or the team have any superstitions)?



CAROLYN KIEGER: I think my staff -- good to see you, Kelsey, thanks for everything you and your staff have done, first of all. But I think I'm the least superstitious on staff. The rest of the staff and the team I think have their little superstition down to outfits, down to pregame meal, down to all that. But I'm kind of old school where, hey, you show up and create your own luck, right.

But in terms of me, who I am, really big competitor. I want the best for our players on and off the court. My job first and foremost as their head coach is to help their dreams come true and to push them to not fail.

And we have phenomenal student athletes here who have about big dreams, big hopes. You look at someone like Makenna and who came in and stuck it out and was loyal for five years. Her and I have had a lot of conversations throughout the last five years of what it's going to take to put this program back on the map. You talk about someone unselfish, you talk about someone who bleeds blue and White, that's Makenna. Her grandpa was able to play in tournaments. Her family are all Penn Staters, and she stuck it out.

There was some hard times the last five years building, and I think when you choose to go to a program that's in a rebuild or on the verge of becoming the program, it tests you as a coach, it tests you as a player, and it's not for everyone; and Makenna stuck it out and seen it through and could not be more proud of her and she's exactly right. Everything we do in the future is going to be a testament to her and what she's built. You know, the culture she's created and every win that comes forward is going to be from this group that helped us build and get to this point.

So you know, love my players. Love coaching at Penn State. Love to compete and excited for the opportunity to do that.

THE MODERATOR: We wish you the best of luck. Thank you.

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