

Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 7, 2026

Duluth, Georgia, USA

Gas South Arena

Duke Blue Devils Coach Kara Lawson Taina Mair

Postgame Press Conference

Duke 65, Notre Dame 63

KARA LAWSON: That was just an incredible March game by both teams. I want to start off by crediting Notre Dame and how hard they played. They made it really difficult for us, especially that third quarter the way they came out of halftime. They have a great competitive spirit over there, and we certainly felt it today.

The fourth quarter, you just kind of have a feeling in these games, it's going to come down to a couple possessions there in the fourth, and we were able to make one more play and get the separation that we needed. It felt like that last play was about two minutes.

When you see the shots going up and the scramble on the offensive boards, we couldn't grab it, so they got a couple of them. But we just continued to fly around and tried to make the shots tough. And obviously that last one, I think Toby blocked it, and we were able to get the win.

We're just so excited. This is one of the best leagues in the country, and we know how hard it is to win, and the more that you're able to beat teams, the harder it gets to beat them again. It's really hard to beat a team of this quality in the regular season and then turn around and have to play them in the tournament and have to beat them. It's just hard.

To be in the championship game in back-to-back seasons for us is something that we're very proud of, and we're excited for the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. T, what does it take, your preparation to play against Hannah? You did a wonderful job this game.



TAINA MAIR: Yeah, I think Ash guarded her for most of the game and I was just there to help her. Even possessions when I was on Hannah, she's a super quick and aggressive player, so I just had to stay in front. That's just the game plan, and I feel like I did just that.

Q. You guys, it was an 18-8 third quarter in favor of Notre Dame. What did you say to your team that you were able to punch back in that fourth quarter and take home the win?

KARA LAWSON: I think, if I'm remembering correctly, and T can correct me if I'm wrong, at the start of the fourth quarter, I believe it was 49-46. So we were down three.

If you zoom out and look at that, you're down a possession with a quarter to go to play for a title. I think most teams take that, right? You take that.

I always try to remind them of where we are in the present. First, here's where we are. They're a quality team, and we talked about how they're going to go on runs, and they did. So they won the third. Credit to them for that. But all that matters at that point is who wins the fourth.

We focused on what we needed to do moving forward, not what had happened in the past. I don't think I even told them we only scored eight points in that quarter. We just talked about what we needed to do moving forward.

Q. I felt like today's game was a really good example of the level of competition that you spoke to in the ACC. What does today's game speak to going forward in the NCAA Tournament?

KARA LAWSON: There's so much quality in our league. For whatever reason our league doesn't garner the same amount of headlines as other leagues and our players don't garner the same amount of headlines as other players, but the quality here is really high.

Look at the young lady to my left. That's one of the best point guards in the country. You just have to watch the games to realize that.



She's a winner, and she competes and she wins. She plays both sides of the ball, and she does whatever we need to win the game.

Somehow that quality has gotten lost in how we evaluate players. We evaluate players based off of statistics, and we've lost the won-loss record or their ability to make winning plays. That to me is the most important characteristics. I've talked about this with T for three years: What's the most important stat for a point guard?

TAINA MAIR: Winning.

KARA LAWSON: Wins. That's it. That's the most important stat. It doesn't matter how many turnovers you have, how many assists you average, how many rebounds you have, how many points you have. What matters is do you lead your team to wins. And that's what Mair does.

She's one of the best winners in the league. When you look at our won-loss record the last three years with her in the lineup, you look at her leading us to a second straight championship game, she does everything that you would want. And she's unafraid of the moment, as well.

I'm just fortunate enough to coach her. I get a lot of accolades or accomplishments because I coach a really good senior point guard, and so I'm just proud of how she performed today and how she's led us all year.

Q. Coach, when they went to that zone, there were a little bit of turnovers early, but then you started pushing the pace and getting buckets before they could set up. What was the emphasis to both break the zone and score in transition before they could set up there?

KARA LAWSON: They do a really good job of stripping you when you catch the ball in the heart of their zone, and that's something that was a problem for us, as you spoke of.

I thought through the second half, we got into a little bit of a rhythm, and I think we're more purposeful with our actions and had an understanding of where we could exploit the zone, and we did a good job.

I thought in the first half we were a little disjointed running our actions and it threw us off. They started the game in man. We started the game off playing really well offensively, and then that tempo switch to the zone threw us off a little bit.

Q. Coach, how much do you believe your strength in

your non-conference this season helped you prepare your team to get to this championship this year?

KARA LAWSON: We always play a hard non-conference, and that's something that's intentional. I think as a player, you like to play against good teams.

I go back to sometimes my playing days -- and it's not too fuzzy yet. There's not too many cobwebs. But when I go back to my playing days, and I think about the games I had the most fun in, the games that I grew the most in, the games that challenged me to be a better player, they were always against the top teams.

I don't really remember one single highlight of a blowout when I was at Tennessee. I remember the big ones. Those were the ones that were the most fun.

I kind of schedule like I'm a player. Well, I am a player, but I kind of schedule like that. They want to play against the top teams. Win or lose, they want to play -- you think that game is fun to play in? That game is a blast to play in. I would say that even if we were the losing team. That's why we schedule that way.

I don't know if the schedule made us win today or not, but I know it's gotten us to this point, and we grew to where we are now because of the schedule. Not just the non-conference, also the league.

I want to say this about our league because we go against some of the top teams and the top coaches in the country in our league, and everyone wants to talk about our non-conference schedule and how that prepared us. Our league prepared us, too. The ACC prepares you. You go against top players. That's how you grow and get better.

Our league exposed us in ways -- even maybe we didn't have losses, but it still exposed us where we needed to get better, and we learned from that, and we grew.

Q. T, kind of lost in the defense, in the last possession at the end, you hit probably the biggest shot of the game, that three-pointer right after Notre Dame cut it to one. Do you remember anything about that? Take us through that shot and what you saw on that possession.

TAINA MAIR: Yeah, I passed up two threes, I think, in the second half where I know I should have shot it. So when I got the ball, I just knew that I had to shoot the ball. But I think the most memorable play probably wasn't a three, probably Toby's block] where the game ended and I seen all my teammates and my coaches super happy that we get to go back to the championship game.

Q. T, you had eight assists this entire game, a great performance from you. Can you talk about the importance of passing in your game and leading to successful shots for your teammates?

TAINA MAIR: Yeah, I think for my team, I just had to be a play maker and do whatever it takes for us to win. My teammates made excellent plays and they finished the plays, so I get the credit for that, but I credit them, as well.

Q. What will be your main focus tomorrow going into tomorrow's championship game?

KARA LAWSON: Right now, the focus is just on the recovery. It was a physical game today, as you saw, both ways. Three games in three days is really challenging.

For us, it's just to get them back to the hotel and focus on getting them physically back. And then the second piece is obviously mentally in preparation. While we don't know our opponent yet, when we do know our opponent, we'll spend a good amount of time together this evening watching film, walking through, so that we can be ready.

Q. Coach, obviously they were without KK Bransford the first time, but in what ways did you see Notre Dame maybe improve most from when you saw them in the regular season until now, and how were you able to roll with those punches and still remain on top?

KARA LAWSON: They have improved a lot over the course of the season. On film, it looked like every area. Offensively they looked like they have more of a comfortability with each other. And then defensively they're more disruptive, even more disruptive than when we saw them in January. So those would be the two areas that I thought they were better.

And we knew that. We saw that on film, and we talked about that with our players, that this was a different team than we saw at the beginning of league play.

Q. Another question about Notre Dame. I know she came up a little bit short today, but when you're facing a player like Hannah Hidalgo at this time of year, what's that like as a coach to have to game plan against that, knowing that she can kind of break the game at any point with everything she does on both ends?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, mindset for us going in is to try to make things as tough as possible. We know we're not going to shut anybody out. We know they're going to score points. We know they're going to make good plays. So

you just try to make things as difficult as possible, knowing that she's going to be able to make some amazing plays on either end and just stay solid and consistent with that through the game.

That's what we try to do. We try to make teams a little more inefficient than they normally are. That's our goal. We feel like if we can do that, then it puts us in a great position.

Q. Coach, watching that game, I felt pride having two Black women in such a big game, coaching so well. Can you speak to that, being in that position?

KARA LAWSON: I think I'm always mindful that I'm the first African-American Duke basketball coach in the history of the school. It's such a distinguished university with a lot of tradition, and certainly in the sport of basketball. So that makes me really proud to know what I represent.

I don't want to speak for Niele, but I am sure she feels the same way. When you're going up against a quality coach like her, you know you have to bring your best. You know your team has to bring their best. That's the highest level of respect you can give another coach is that you prepare your team well, knowing that it's going to be a hard game to win.

We're trying to have as much success as possible, and to be able to meet in a semifinal with a championship berth on the line is something that's special.

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