

# Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 7, 2026

Duluth, Georgia, USA

Gas South Arena

**Louisville Cardinals**

**Coach Jeff Walz**

**Elif Istanbuluoglu**

**Imari Berry**

Postgame Press Conference

Louisville 65, North Carolina 57

JEFF WALZ: I just want to start off and congratulate Carolina and Courtney. They're a fantastic team. They've been playing extremely, extremely good basketball. I'll be shocked if they're not hosting the first two rounds. I think they've shown that they deserve to be a top 16. So there's no doubt that they're going to have a ton of success, I feel, in the tournament.

For our group, I was really proud of them. We started off, we did some really nice things offensively. We executed. Then in the second quarter, which has been our problem the past month and a half -- there's one quarter that we don't perform well, and unfortunately for us, it was the second quarter -- but we were able to hang on and have a one-point lead. I know Carolina took the lead in the third, but we responded and did some really good things.

Defensively, I thought we played well. We worked hard to keep them off the offensive glass, which we knew was going to be something that they were going to try and do and focus on. I'm just so proud of these two here.

Elif is a warrior. What she's done from last year to this year, I fought for most improved in this league. She goes from four points a game and two boards to being our glue. She is the one that's in games when she needs to score the ball in the post, she scores it. She's passed the ball extremely well in our past two games, and then she's always got the toughest post assignment. So I'm just really proud of her.

Then Imari sitting here, she is one that I truly believe, and



I've told her, I think she can be Player of the Year in this league if she will play for 40 minutes. What Imari does is she'll score 13 in a four-minute stretch, and then she'll end the game with 14, and I'll be like, hey, what about the other 36 minutes? But it's a mentality for her.

Adrienne Johnson who's on my staff who played in the league for about eight years, we've already talked about for Imari it's going to be is she willing to get into elite shape. From last year to this year, remarkable change, but what's she going to do this spring and summer. Because that's what separates the really good ones from the great ones. When you don't need to come out, when you don't take a break -- that's what Hannah does. When she's on the floor -- she's bouncing the entire time.

That's what's so impressive. But the strides that she's made, it's pretty darned impressive, which is why she was sixth Player of the Year in this league. I'll finish with that. Just really proud of all of them.

**Q. There was a point there I think you heaved a half-court shot and it did not count but you did this, like, Derrick Rose style, straight faced, teammates going crazy. That stood out to me because I thought it was almost a momentum shift even though the shot didn't count. What did you take from that moment?**

IMARI BERRY: After shootaround, me and E usually practice that shot every day. The chance came and I knocked it down. It didn't count, but it still gave us some mood into the fourth quarter.

**Q. Jeff, you held UNC's front court to six points. Ciera Toomey and Nyla Harris combined for six. What was working for you defensively and what did that game plan look like?**

JEFF WALZ: Well, it's her. She's just a competitor. She embraces contact. I told them, it's just the fact of the way it's been for 30-something years that I've been in this game. The regular season is called one way, and then as soon as you get in the postseason play, everybody loves the way it's called. But unfortunately it's too ticky-tack



during the regular season. In postseason play, it's a physical game.

I think people actually enjoy it. E embraces it. She's not scared of it. She doesn't back down from it. If you do, it's not going to be a good thing for you. She just kept battling and battling. And then I thought Laura did some nice things at time, Anaya Hardy came in. And then Mac, Mac is down there stuck guarding post players the entire time.

I just think our toughness showed tonight, and I'm really proud of them.

**Q. For the players, your coach's type of tough love coaching, what do you get from him knowing that he's won so many times and takes teams to tournament finals?**

JEFF WALZ: What tough love?

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: It's all love. Like he knows how to win. Like, there's no doubt. We've seen from the past, when he says something -- we're coachable. We're all coachable, so when he says something, we know it's going to work. Again, it's all love. We know that, and we believe what he says.

It's just at that point we just have to do what he says. We all trust him, what he says and all his plans, and the staff, too.

IMARI BERRY: I feel like he's right every single time. He knows basketball, so you just -- if he calls you over and he's got to say something, you just listen and be coachable and listen to what he's got to say.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: We all know he wants the best for us. As a team and also as a player, from the outside it looks like toughness or tough love, but he just wants us to be better, every single day. Possession by possession to be honest. Every practice, every single day.

I know from outside it kind of looks like toughness, but it's all love.

IMARI BERRY: It comes from the heart.

**Q. For E, you came off the bench after hitting your free throws late and you seemed overcome with emotion in a good way. How much does this moment mean to you?**

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I have to be there for my team. I know it was painful at the point, but I went in, I did some stuff with Ben, and he did a good job, to be honest.

Emotionally I was just looking at the time, I was like four minutes, I just went possession by possession. I was like, I need to be there for my teammates. The pain was temporary, to be honest, because I just wanted to get out there, be there for my team and wanted to win, so I felt like that was more than the pain.

**Q. Just to follow up, how are you feeling now, and do you think you'll be fine for tomorrow?**

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I'm good?

JEFF WALZ: She'll be fine for tomorrow. When I walked down there and I was just explaining how things work in America, because I wasn't in Turkey, but she's down there screaming and hollering, and I go, ankle? She goes, yeah. I said, this is how it works in our program. It's crazy, you have two of them. You only need one.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: That's literally what he said.

JEFF WALZ: If you get hit in the nose, we stop everything. You've got one. So we will take care of that. Ankle, you've got two ankles, you're good, let's go. Because she was in some pain, but she started to laugh, which I am a huge believer, you've got to have some laughter as you're doing this stuff.

Yeah, I am intense. I am. There's no question about it. But as you all know here and you can tell as a stutterer, if I try to speak during a game really calm, it does not come out. So every once in a while, too, there might be a four-letter word involved. But I always say it, if you've never seen The King's Speech, you need to watch The King's Speech. If you really want to know what stuttering is about and how tough and hard it can be at times to try to communicate with people, The King's Speech, there's not a better movie.

Some people argue with me, but at least for me, when I do cuss, I don't stutter. They know that. I tell them up front. I tell them when I recruit them.

They know I'm not attacking them personally. I do love them. I treat them like my own kids. My own children will tell you they don't like me all the time, either, because it's called parenting. That's our job as coaches is to be an extension of their parents. We're going to teach them basketball, but we're also going to teach them life.

I'm never going to apologize for who I am or how I do things. You might not like it, then that's fine. It's okay. But I promise you, if you go back and you talk to the players that have played here, they're going to tell you the

experience they had, and they're going to tell you I love them like my own kids.

So I might not do it the same way as others, and I might not do it out in public where everybody sees it, but they know that however it's going to be, it's going to be honest. I don't blow smoke up their rear ends, as I like to say, okay, because I'm never going home after a game or a practice wondering what I said to Imari Berry going, man, what lie did I tell you, what BS -- no, I just tell her the truth.

That's why I think we have really good relationships, and these kids play extremely hard. I'm proud of them. I'm proud of all of them.

Laura Ziegler tonight, she was awful in the first half. Awful. I told her. Like, just the truth, you're bad. But she came out in the second half and made some big-time shots and played big-time basketball, and I told her that, as well. I just think as a coach, that's how I do it, and it's how I'm always going to do it.

**Q. For the players, this is a chance to play for a championship. I know you haven't had much time to process it, but what does that mean to you and to this team?**

IMARI BERRY: I'm excited. Last year we fell short, so this year I'm ready to get my revenge. I'm excited. I'm so excited.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Yeah, I'm excited, too. That's the plan. That's what we fight for. Nothing less, to be honest. We were expecting this. We just have to show up 40 minutes and just play our best basketball at this point.

**Q. For everybody, the "Legacy on Lock," what does that mean? What do you take that as your motto, or what does that mean for you in the postseason?**

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: That's what Louisville's program is built for. I think that's what it means to us. That's what this program is built for. We're in this program, and we know nothing less. I think that's what it means to us.

IMARI BERRY: When I came to Louisville, that's the first thing that Coach Walz said, keep the legacy going, and we have a warmup shirt, and we're going to keep it going.

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