

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - UNLV vs Michigan

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

**Michigan Wolverines**

**Coach Kim Barnes Arico**

**Laila Phelia**

**Leigha Brown**

**Emily Kiser**

Media Conference



bleeding because you get to play some really great competition that really prepares you for the NCAA Tournament. But obviously it's hard to go in and you're going to have to bring your best night in and night out.

I think, yeah, we faced some injuries. A couple people were out, whether that was Laila -- we had a few people here and there that weren't available. I think it's tough when you're used to playing together the whole season and then things like that happen. You're going to have to make adjustments and figure things out and figure out what lineups work together and who's going to step up.

Yeah, I think this last week and a half or two weeks has been really, really good for us to really get healthy and make sure our bodies feel 100 percent, fine tune some things on our own side. And I think we're ready to go and we're feeling good.

**Q. Laila, I know you'd like to get back the month of February because you had an injury. How are you feeling and what did you learn about the team when you were trying to get healthy?**

LAILA PHELIA: Yeah, right now I feel better, had some time to recover. But the biggest thing for me is that I definitely feel like everyone had to step up in like different places and work on what they needed to work on. But the biggest thing is just being able to have that faith in your team that everyone was able to take on the roles that they had to take on, and I feel like that did nothing but prepare us for this NCAA Tournament and getting everyone that experience.

**Q. Starting with Laila, feeling good physically and then feeling like you're 100 percent in the context of playing basketball aren't always the same thing. I was wondering how close you are or how anxious you feel about where you're going to be tomorrow? And either teammate, if you could give us some of your thoughts on what her return gives the team going into the tournament.**

LAILA PHELIA: I personally feel like I'll be ready for tomorrow, mentally and physically. Can't wait.

**Q. Emily, talk about the arrival at the tournament. For you personally I understand you're the first one in Michigan history to make four straight NCAA tournaments. What that means to you.**

EMILY KISER: Yeah, it's awesome. Coach actually mentioned it the other day in practice, and it took me back and I hadn't thought about it. It's kind of become a norm for our program to make this tournament. Obviously we missed out sophomore year because of COVID and whatnot, so I actually would have gone five times.

But just where our program really is as a whole, I'm really the first player to do that. But hopefully in the future people catch up to me and kind of make that.

But no, it's crazy, you think about you grow up, like the NCAAs is the dream. You fill out those brackets as you're growing up, and it was a cool moment to reflect on my career here.

**Q. Leigha, take us through a little bit of the development of the team this season. You had a couple big wins by winning a tournament and then you got to the brutal conference tournament, a lot of big hitters in the tournament. Talk about what you learned through the process and having to deal with the month of February going through that schedule, because I know you had to deal with a lot of injuries.**

LEIGHA BROWN: Yeah, I think it's almost a blessing and a curse how difficult our conference is. I think it's a



LEIGHA BROWN: Even Laila's first game back, just her presence on the court, I think. Whether that's her offensive abilities and her explosiveness and really just her versatility, I think that's a huge thing for us. When she's on the court, I think teams are forced to guard us a lot differently and respect us in different ways.

But I think defensively, too, this whole season she's been our lockdown defender when it comes to one-on-one defense and always guarding the other team's best guard or other team's best player. I think just having her out there -- obviously she's ready to go, but I think regardless, I think she's a huge part of our team and will always be a big asset in any way.

EMILY KISER: Yeah, for Laila to go down on us and not have her, it made our whole team better. A lot of people got experience that they wouldn't have if Laila was still there. Obviously having her back 100 percent, I think we're feeling good as a group for sure.

**Q. What do you guys know about UNLV having scouted them the last couple days?**

EMILY KISER: Yeah, they're a tough, physical team. They like to push the pace. They've done a whole lot of winning this year, so I know they're coming in confident. So we're definitely not taking anybody lightly. We're expecting a battle tomorrow.

We definitely want to apply some pressure. I know in the Big Ten, it's a little bit different of a game, and we want to kind of put some pressure on them there. But we're excited for the game tomorrow. Expecting a battle.

LAILA PHELIA: Yeah, definitely. I also feel like just being able to -- as we've been watching them, taking advantage of areas that we're able to, and of course applying that pressure right off the bat.

LEIGHA BROWN: Yeah, and I think like Emily kind of touched on the Big Ten is kind of a different conference when it comes to physicality, strength, athleticism. So I think just really being able to use that to our advantage, yeah, and just really coming out of the gates just really ready to go and really taking it to them.

**Q. Emily, you guys made it to the Elite 8 last year; what can you take from that? Seems like you guys returned a lot of experience. How does it help confidence, if at all, going into this year, or do you feel like you start over?**

EMILY KISER: Yeah, even from my junior year when we

made the Sweet 16 and then the Elite 8, kind of taking that step forward every year. Even last year when we were playing for a Final Four, it was kind of a holy crap moment a little bit of we hadn't been here yet. Just that confidence of once you've actually been in that moment and how much it helps you just having that calmness, I think, going into a game. Just knowing that you've been here in the moment and that you trust your teammates, you trust the work you've put in.

Just being in that moment, kind of being under those pressure situations and being able to have more of a level head, I think is huge.

**Q. Laila, now that you're back -- I know the team kind of was in a position toward the end where you guys could have maybe hosted and then kind of dropped down a little bit, but now that you've returned, do you feel like it's the right time, like you guys are healthy at the right time?**

LAILA PHELIA: Yes, I definitely feel like this is going to be a good run, of course, in the tournament. Yes, it was kind of tough towards the end of the tournament, but then again, I feel like just that experience that everyone was able to have and being able to go into this tournament and just like coming back together and picking up where we left off.

**Q. Several of you talked about putting pressure on UNLV right away. Specifically -- I know you can't give away too much, but are you talking about defending the length of the court or are you talking about pounding it inside offensively, up tempo? What do you mean by that?**

LAILA PHELIA: Both. Just being able to hop on them right away defensively and applying that pressure offensively by really getting in there attacking and stuff and making them defend us.

LEIGHA BROWN: It's kind of like a mentality, too. We don't want to come out soft and kind of let them do what they want to do. So just trying to take things away that -- obviously we've been able to see over the last four days that -- they want to do. I think that's more so kind of what we're talking about.

EMILY KISER: And I think our team, we've really been fueled by defense. It's something we really tried to lock in from the start of the year. I think when we come out and we're aggressive on the defensive side, it really fuels our offense and gives us some easier looks at that way. So definitely both sides, but I think definitely really honing in on the defensive side.

**Q. It's not abnormal to have more than one person average double digits on a team; it is abnormal to have three players averaging better than 16 points? Because you're the only three that do that in the country. I wanted to ask you about the development of the relationship, how that came about that you all have that on-floor relationship to have that kind of production between the three of you.**

EMILY KISER: I haven't really thought about it, to be honest. It's not something that is ever really talked about. I think for me personally, just having that confidence that -- you don't have to come out and score however many points a game, because you have that trust in your teammates, and really anyone on any given night can come out and score.

I don't think anyone is ever really worried about scoring, but just having the confidence that anyone can do it, I know has been great for me and takes a lot of pressure off, I think, each of us for sure.

LAILA PHELIA: Yeah, for sure.

LEIGHA BROWN: I think our team chemistry, how well we're able to play together, set each other up. I know Emily and I have been kind of the brunt of it a little bit this season of me just kind of throwing it up knowing where she's at. I think that comes with the experience of playing together over the years.

Same thing with Laila, I think now that she's back, really getting back into the groove of her being on the floor and kind of the spots that she's going to be in and where I can find her and where she can find us. I think that the team chemistry and just playing together and experience definitely speaks a lot about that.

LAILA PHELIA: Yeah, and I also feel like just piggy-backing off of that, just the confidence that Emily and Leigha and the other players have in you. I feel like that's pretty rare knowing that your teammates have your back regardless and they have all the confidence in the world in you.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, tell us a little bit about the path you took to get here. You had a 12-1 start, very impressive win in the tournament and then you hit the grueling conference play, seven teams from your conference in the tournament. You've earned your second highest seed ever in Michigan, so tell us about your road to Baton Rouge.

KIM BARNES ARICO: Thank you for that. We did, we had

a terrific start. We graduated an All-American last year, and I think there was a lot of questions coming into the season if we would be able to be the team that we were the season before. And I was really proud of our team and the way we started. Obviously led by the three young women that you had up here on the podium. But really our entire team really took the steps forward to sustain that consistency in our program.

It was a terrific start, and then we headed into Big Ten play. Our league is stronger and better than it's ever been. Obviously we have a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament, and we had one that was on the bubble that could have gone No. 1, became a No. 2 seed, another No. 2 seed, and a No. 3. That just speaks volumes with seven teams in the tournament.

Speaks volumes about our league. I think our conference play was incredibly difficult. We battled through some adversity in February, like you had talked about. But it's great to have everyone back, and it's great to be here in Baton Rouge and an opportunity to still be playing in the NCAA Tournament.

**Q. Your second leading scorer was out for the month of February with an injury. What did you learn about your team as you're going through that stretch knowing that there's 17 points a game sitting next to you on the bench?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, it's tough. It's tough for any program when you lose someone like Laila Phelia. She just affected the game for our team in so many different ways. She was arguably our best defender, our most dynamic player, tremendous scorer, such an energy kid. When we lost her, that obviously hurt. But like our players had talked about, it gave an opportunity for everyone else on our team to really step up and really earn some quality minutes.

Now heading into the tournament, Jordan Hobbs is a player that got the start for Laila, and she's really shown her ability to be successful. Greta Kampschroeder is another player that received significant minutes during Laila's absence, and she's really been able to contribute.

I think headed into the tournament, it's important that you have depth. We were able to learn a lot about our team during the month of February.

Obviously it affected some of our games, but I think every team is going to go through those bumps in the road, and it's how you handle that adversity and how you're able to bounce back.

**Q. I was wondering, introduce us to your team; how would you describe their identity on both offense and defense?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, I think we're led by a trio of players, but then we have a great complement. Maddie Nolan wasn't here today, but she's a senior for us who's had an incredible season.

Cameron Williams is another player that wasn't on the podium today, but gives us great length and great athleticism and really can rebound and finish around the rim.

I think we can really score. We can score in bunches.

I think Leigha Brown, she was named honorable mention all-American yesterday. I think she's arguably one of the best guards in the country. I'm really excited for everyone in Baton Rouge to have an opportunity to see her play.

But then we have a fifth-year kid in Emily Kiser who reminds me sometimes that her freshman year she played 93 total minutes. I think she's played 93 minutes in one of our games this year. Just her growth and her development and her ability to buy into the process of becoming a great basketball player has been absolutely incredible.

Her experience with Leigha Brown's experience really helps drive our team, and then Laila is just super dynamic.

I think we're a team that can score from multiple spots on the offensive end and really tries to pride itself on playing defense and rebounding.

**Q. Not you, but the average fan may have a reason to dismiss a team like UNLV. Although they're not from a Power Five conference. They were undefeated in your league. Speak to what kind of team you feel like they are and also a player like Desi-Rae Young who averages a double-double a game. What problems does she present?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Well, first of all, I don't know about the average fan. It seems like everything I've read, everyone has picked them to win, so I don't know about that. They're an incredible team. Any team that can win over 30 basketball games in a season is special. It doesn't matter what conference you are in, if you can go undefeated in your conference and then go to the conference tournament and win the conference tournament, holy cow, that's pretty special.

They are a great team, a team that I think everyone around the country knows is really good. I think if you watch them,

they have a dynamic post player in Desi-Rae Young. She reminds me a little bit of Naz Hillmon who was our all-American. She's strong, she's physical, she rebounds, she scores, she defends. She can do everything for them.

Then she's surrounded by some great, great guard play, as well as a face up 4 who can go with her back to the basket and shoot the three. They are a well-balanced team.

I pretty much watched all their games. I've seen games where Desi-Rae didn't have a great scoring day and they've still won. I think that speaks to their balance.

They're a terrific team, and I don't think there's any doubt that they're going to be great tomorrow, as well.

**Q. What do you think about this matchup that makes it such a great game on paper, and what are you looking forward to tomorrow?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, I think it's actually a great matchup. And when I think about them, I feel like they're similar to us in terms of they have really a dynamic guard and a tremendous post player, but then a real complement of players surrounding them and some great depth.

I think it's going to be an unbelievable matchup. They change their defenses, they're going to pressure us. They're going to try to throw a zone at us, throw a man at us, and they run a ton of things offensively. They really try to pick on your match-ups. They really execute their stuff. They're incredibly well-coached.

I just think it's going to be a great, great basketball game. Probably throughout the country a lot of 6-11, 5-12 match-ups are going to be terrific games.

I'm expecting it to be a great, great way to kick off the NCAA Tournament with this game tomorrow.

**Q. Your players talked a lot about coming into the game with a lot of pressure. What does that look like to you?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: That was a great question. I don't know if that was Victor who asked that or one of you guys, but what does pressure look like on the offensive end or what does pressure look like on the defensive end? I think it's definitely a combination. I think we have to play to our strengths just like UNLV has to play to theirs.

We have to be able to go inside out. We have to get Emily involved on the offensive end. We have to get Cameron involved on the offensive end and really try to put pressure on their bigs. Try to put Desi-Rae in positions where she's



not only going to be able to play offense but have to defend, as well. But then really try to take them out of what they want to do on the offensive end. Try to switch some things up on the defensive end for us and try to make them uncomfortable and go against our length.

I think if there's one area that we have an advantage, if it is an advantage, is we are a little bit longer and try to use our guards' length to pressure them.

Leigha is 6'1", Laila is six foot, Maddie is six foot, to try to use that length to our advantage.

**Q. With Laila, and I asked her, too, what would you say are kind of the physical and mental and emotional challenges for her. Because even if she's pain-free, just when you have that long of a layoff and you come into high-stakes games, maybe it's easy to get frustrated if your precision, timing, everything isn't quite there.**

KIM BARNES ARICO: That's a really good question, as well, and that's something that Laila and I have spoken about through the course of her recovery, and pretty much every single day with the help of our trainer, as well.

Okay, where are you from a physical standpoint, but where are you also from a mental perspective.

I think it was really important, and Laila spoke to this a lot. The ability for her to play in the Big Ten Tournament gave her that opportunity to get back on the court, where it wasn't in the NCAA Tournament.

I think she kind of got her feet wet in the Big Ten Tournament and gained some of her confidence back. She talked about golly, I don't know if I want the NCAA Tournament to be my first game back with the stakes being what they are and with the pace of the game being what it is. But playing in the Big Ten Tournament, she got her feet wet against Penn State.

And then the next day we played against one of the top teams in the country in Ohio State where she played some more minutes and really had a big role in that game and was really able to go against some of the best guards in the country and defend those best guards and have to score against those best guards.

So I thought that kind of gave her some confidence, and that kind of has made this transition to the NCAA Tournament a little bit smoother and not her first opportunity to be back on the court.

**Q. Your girls talked about the physical nature of play**

**and how they welcome it, and I guess the challenges of playing in your conference. In what ways is that an advantage for this time of year? You talked about being big at other positions. People think physical is just down low, but it can be all around the court. How well prepared and how much does that help them this time of year?**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. And when I just spoke about UNLV and their success, obviously we don't have that same record, but we do feel as if the Big Ten play has prepared us for the competition tomorrow.

Just going against that size and that strength every single game and that athleticism, because a team like UNLV is similar. When I watch them, they look like a Big Ten team. A Big Ten team might be a little bit longer, but they do have that athleticism and those pieces and that post play of a Big Ten team.

So I think our conference -- like I said, we played against Ohio State three times, Indiana two times. Those are teams that have a 1 seed and a 2 seed. Iowa, Maryland. Hopefully playing against that competition has prepared us and given us the opportunity to play against that size and strength on a regular basis.

**Q. I don't know if you know Lindy La Rocque very well, but I was wondering what you thought about the job she's doing. She's only in year three but this is her second trip to the tournament already.**

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, incredible. I'm on the coaches' top 25 poll every week, so I've kind of been following UNLV's season all year long, and when I looked up who was coaching, that name immediately came to mind. I'm not showing my age, but I do remember her as a player, and she was a pretty incredible player, and she is an unbelievable coach.

The job that she's doing is outstanding. They have talented, talented players, but she's got them playing exceptionally well. They're super disciplined on both the offensive and defensive end, that you can tell that they are following the game plan and they really buy into it, and they play with a ton of energy and passion.

She's doing a heck of a job, and like I said, they're a great team. Really impressed with what she's done for sure.

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