

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

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

UNLV Lady Rebels

Lindy La Rocque

Desi-Rae Young

Justice Ethridge

Essence Booker

Media Conference



We're ready for whatever comes up next.

ESSENCE BOOKER: Really gets kind of easy for us to flip to a new chapter. Season, we went undefeated, then we flipped to a new chapter in the conference tournament, wanted to go 3-0 there. Starting here new, want to go 1-0 tomorrow. Just being able to flip to a new chapter and leave the past in the past, as Justice said.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. 24 hours until tip-off tomorrow. Desi-Rae, what has this week been like for you?

DESI-RAE YOUNG: I think our preparation has been great. I think we've been really super aggressive in practice. I think that's something we talk about all the time, is just being aggressive, being able to start out strong.

I think we're doing a great job with the scout, focusing and dialing in.

Q. Essence, after a week of practice and film, what do you know about Michigan?

ESSENCE BOOKER: Trying to get our scout (smiling).

Honestly, they're a great team. Props to them, and their coach. Very well-coached.

I mean, we're going to play every team how they draw it up. Honestly they're a great offensive-minded team. They got some height on us, so they're very tall.

We just need to go in there, execute, rebound, we got to try to run on them.

Q. Essence, what is different about this team than last year? Do you feel like you're more prepared? How are you approaching this tournament?

ESSENCE BOOKER: I feel like last year we've been there, so this year we got that advantage: we've been there before, we know what it takes to get there. I think we're familiar with the atmosphere.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome you back. We are pleased to be joined by three players from UNLV. We have Desi-Rae Young, Justice Ethridge, and Essence Booker.

Welcome to Baton Rouge. Congratulations on your season to this point.

Something very unique, Desi-Rae, there's only three players in the country that are averaging 18 points, 10 rebounds and two assists per game. Two of those three are here in this regional. Angel Reese for LSU and yourself. How have you been able to keep up that consistency this year?

DESI-RAE YOUNG: I have a shout-out to my team, them being able to feed me the ball, make the right play to me. We faced a lot of adversity this year, especially me being double-teamed in the post. So me being able to make those extra passes, repost, I really give all the glory to my team.

THE MODERATOR: Justice, you come in 31-2. You haven't lost in the calendar year of 2023. A lot of teams might get a little complacent when you're winning. How have y'all been able to keep that focus and success you've built up?

JUSTICE ETHRIDGE: I think we've been really good with keeping the past games in the past, just trying to look forward what we have ahead of us.



I feel like that's the big difference from last year, just getting our toes wet last year, but this year we want to go further than we did. We don't just want to be excited to be here, we want to get past that first game.

Q. What does it mean to be doing what you've been doing at UNLV as people from Las Vegas?

JUSTICE ETHRIDGE: I think it's just really special, like, to have changed the program for the better, being successful, having our friends and family be able to come out and support us. The city of Las Vegas has been really good about coming out. I think it's just great.

ESSENCE BOOKER: Basketball accolades. Obviously we made history at UNLV with Lindy. We changed the program around. It's something we're always going to remember not only with each other but with Las Vegas, as well.

For me, it's bigger than basketball. It's about my family, being a role model, making sure others can see what we have created so they can try to be a part of it, as well.

DESI-RAE YOUNG: Just take a piece of that history. I think me coming in as a freshman, Coach Lindy also being her first year, I think we did a great job my freshman year. Along the way we've been thriving ever since.

Just like Essence said, I do it for the community as well. I think Las Vegas is underrated for basketball talents, things like that. But I think we've done a great job putting UNLV, women's basketball in Las Vegas in general, on the map.

Q. What are some of the ways that opposing teams this year have tried to keep you from getting the ball down low? What do you expect Michigan to try tomorrow?

DESI-RAE YOUNG: They double-team, triple-team even sometimes. They front. I expect Michigan to do all of that.

In my opinion, it doesn't really matter about any of that. If they stop one person, there's four other people out there who can get the job done.

Q. From your perspective, you're the one trying to get her the ball, what have you seen from defenses this year? What do you have planned if Michigan tries to take her away? How important is it to keep Desi-Rae involved?

ESSENCE BOOKER: For me, I feel like we've seen the bag full of tricks, to be honest. A lot of different things I

probably haven't seen in my entire career.

It's hard to stop a walking double-double. She is a walking double-double. She's going to get a double-double tomorrow. For me as a point guard, I try to make sure we get her going, whether she has zero points within the first two minutes or zero points within the last couple minutes. I make sure I call a play whether Lindy calls it or not, just to get the ball in Desi's hands, because that's where it belongs.

Q. Justice and Essence, what would an NCAA win mean for you guys as seniors?

JUSTICE ETHRIDGE: I think it would be very special. I don't know if UNLV has in the last maybe decade, so I think it would be really cool. For it to be both of our senior years, we want to go out on top, get as far as we can, keep playing as long as we can.

ESSENCE BOOKER: I mean, I feel like we sparked a fire in everyone, UNLV being in everyone's conversation recently. This year especially.

Being able to have that NCAA win, again, we're not going to forget about it. We don't just want to be here, I mean, we want to win. Just send that message around.

Q. During this streak it seems like several different people have had a moment, someone a moment in one game, someone another game. What does that say about your team, game to game it can be a different person?

DESI-RAE YOUNG: I mean, I think it shows that we're really an unstoppable team. Anyone's capable. Say Alyssa Frescas, she's a shooter. No one stops her. She gets going, it's hard to stop her streak. Justice as well. Justice gets downhill super fast. Essence pushes the ball in transition. I'm in the post rebounding. So is Alyssa Brown.

I think we all bring something to the table. Everyone can't stop everyone some games.

Q. Desi, Michigan players said they really want to start fast, put you under a lot of pressure. What is your goal for the start? What kind of identity do you want to impose?

DESI-RAE YOUNG: Our identity is playing in and out. We love to go inside. We love to score more points inside. I think we play fast as well. Our transition offense is our best offense. I think we do a good job executing our plays and getting the ball on the rim just so we can offensive

rebound as well.

I think they want to play fast, but we want to play under control, we want to play at our pace and control our own destiny.

Q. Essence, you guys get this practice coming up, then some time before tip-off tomorrow. Any team rituals or personal things you do before the game to get you locked in?

ESSENCE BOOKER: I don't think there's really any team ritual. I feel like Lindy and the coaching staff does a great job of giving us our space before the game to do what we need to do personally.

For me, I try to take time to myself. If I have any questions about the scout, I'm obviously not prepared. I try to prepare myself that way. Just get my mind under control because it's more of a mind game than a basketball game, honestly.

THE MODERATOR: Best of luck tomorrow, ladies.

We are joined by UNLV head coach Lindy La Rocque.

Coach, congratulations so far in the season. I'm sure a lot of coaches would like to know what you bottled up on December 18th because you haven't lost since. Being able to keep that focus and not get complacent when you're putting together a win streak like that...

LINDY LA ROCQUE: That game feels like it was a while ago, and it was. I think the biggest thing, we had this even before that game, really have kind of kept it all year, our motto is our most important game is the next game. We haven't just said it, but we've lived it and prepared for it, then played like it. I think that's really why where we're at, have a streak going, have won a lot of games.

Obviously it starts with our staff of being disciplined, setting a great game plan. It's obviously the players carrying it out and living that. Our most important game is the next one. It obviously couldn't be more true now.

THE MODERATOR: When you look at some of the games you've played, a lot of big wins, but also wins by 5, by 1, by 6. There have been some challenges. What did the team learn about itself or what did you learn about the team?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Yeah, obviously we were able to go undefeated in the regular season, then the conference. A lot of people say, You've been dominating. That just hasn't been the case. We've been able to win close games.

I think the biggest thing is this team knows how to win. We have a great belief and trust in each other. When the game is close and tight, they don't panic. They are really composed and poised, look at each other, look at me, How are we going to win this game? Then they go out there and execute.

I think that's the biggest thing. They've got the experience. They're winners. They know how to win and pull out some close games.

I think also we've been able to take those lessons from those close games. We're never going to give a win back. We're excited to have every single one. They all gave us something different to improve upon. We continue to get better. Even in a win, you have to have an experienced team to be able to win and still practice the next day like you lost, to improve on those things. It didn't feel good all the time for them. They didn't love me for that most of the time, but they did it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. 24 hours away from tip-off. What have you seen from your team so far here?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Just a great focus and attention to detail, a look in their eye like they want to do something. It is nice to know that we're 24 hours. It's kind of felt like we've been waiting for this game all week, because we have. Now especially that we're close, I think our game plan is set. They know it. They're bought into it. We've practiced it. Now it's just kind of about staying loose and ready to play for tomorrow.

Q. Your first NCAA tournament as a mom with your baby and family here. How special has it been for you?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: I mean, this season in general has been so extremely special. Obviously I have a new lens now, being a mom, having Ellie around. Just kind of really keeps that in the forefront.

For all of our players and our families that are able to travel, the ones that aren't, that's what makes what we do special, the journey special, is being able to share it with the people that we love. That's no different for me and my family.

Q. You said you've never been to Louisiana before this. How is the buildup to this? How have you enjoyed Louisiana so far?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Maybe we brought this great



weather. I don't know if it's like this all the time, but the weather has been amazing. I see some people shaking their heads (smiling). Hopefully I don't turn the tides here tonight.

It's been great. We're staying at a great hotel. The hospitality here has been awesome for our team. We had some great seafood last night. The food has been good. Obviously we're happy to be here. It's been awesome. We went and saw the tiger. Everyone is really excited.

It being a business trip, but we like to have fun, enjoy where we're at, let our team experience new places and new things. It's no different for this trip.

Q. A different focus we're seeing, different hunger from Essence Booker and Desi-Rae Young. What kind of different hunger are you seeing this time around from your seniors?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: They're just really determined. I think they've had that with them really in the last few months. That's them taking some ownership over the team. This is their team. Obviously I'm coaching 'em and helping steer the ship. Especially for Essence, this is her team as the point guard, always the leader, as the senior. She wants to do everything that she can for her team and help everyone be prepared and be successful on the court.

And Desi is no different. Justice is quiet, but she's got that same hunger, too. They've all bought in for each other. That's not something that I create. I maybe give them the platform to do that with each other, but that's great leadership.

Q. Is there maybe a moment this season you could point to when you as a team knew you could go on this run and win all these games, get to this moment again?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: I mean, there's a lot of different moments. Some of those close games, even early on, it was our second conference game when we won in overtime, Colorado State. We had to have a couple late-game plays. That was still last year, New Year's Eve actually. Once we were able to, like, do that, that was again pretty quickly after our most recent loss.

Then there's a couple different points throughout the conference season when we played really well. He did an Air Force, New Mexico road trip, a tough road trip, just played really well. I was like, Whoa, this is pretty good.

There's maybe a couple different key moments. But overall we try to just keep our head down and keep

working. Maybe next month I'll look at that.

Q. We talked about Desi about how she faces double-teams. How has that experienced prepared her for March?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Yeah, our team, they're aware probably the other team's game plan is going to center around Desi, as it should. If I was playing us, that's what it would be. They have to have some sort of plan. We've seen different people do it throughout the year. A double-team, a heavy sag, trying to be physical, trying to get her in foul trouble, different things.

I think the biggest thing is Desi has grown so much, being patient down there, not getting frustrated, still working really hard even if she isn't getting the ball because it's opening up something else. We praise her for that.

Then when she does get the ball, she's grown tremendously in her passing ability out of a double-team, facing up, making plays, driving and kick. She's got a great touch on her shot. So she's gotten really good at kind of reading that defense quickly and making a quick decision and a quick move, being pretty efficient at it, so...

She's grown a lot in that area. Again, like she said, it's a product of her team finding her and being open and knocking down shots when she's commanding that double-team, still keeping the main thing. The main thing is we're going inside.

Q. Kim Barnes Arico said you play like a Big Ten team. What does that mean to you?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: I'm not sure. I would love to know what she means by that.

I think she probably means she's giving us a lot of respect, which we're grateful for. She's a heck of a coach, been there for a few years, has had some really good teams. There's some really good teams in the Big Ten. I imagine that's what she's referencing.

I haven't played in the league, so I don't know exactly the ins-and-outs. I would imagine it's coming from a place of respect, and that we've got talent. Yes, we have Desi, but we have other people out there that can make just as many plays. You can't just not guard people out there.

Q. Length at the guard spots. Their shortest guard is two inches taller than Justice. What do you do to counter that?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: They are really long, especially at

the guard spot. I think that will be an adjustment for us early on. Obviously we can't practice that because we don't have anyone out there. That's hard for us to replicate in practice. I think it will be a little bit of an adjustment for our guards early on in the game.

But I think you don't just change what you do because they've got a little bit of length. Our guards are still going to look to attack the basket, obviously shoot when they're open. I think, again, first two, five, 10 minutes, we'll be able -- it's more of a feeling thing of how quickly do I need to get my shot off, some of the spacing stuff. Once you kind of get in the game, I think our team will be able to just make those adjustments.

Q. Your message to your team tonight?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Our biggest game of the year is tomorrow. We're excited. We're prepared. We really, really respect our opponent. They are very good. But we are worthy to be here, as well, to be on the court.

Let's go out and play well and play together. I think if we're aggressive and we play hard, we play together, it can be a really exciting game.

Q. What does it mean to you to have led this program to where it is as someone from Las Vegas?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Yeah, being born and raised in Las Vegas, being a Rebel my whole life, that was the first time I ever cheered for before Las Vegas had all the pro sports, this is just an extremely special opportunity. I still kind of talk with my family, I'm like, Can you believe I'm head coach of the Lady Rebels? Can you believe that (smiling)?

Here we are. Obviously when I took this job, I had a vision. I've seen what UNLV can do and has done, the tradition of basketball in town. It's really special to help put this into fruition for our community, city. It's such a privilege to serve and honor our community by being in this position and creating a program and building this program to the level that it's at.

I carry that with me everywhere 'cause I'm just a basketball coach, but it's really special to do it for Las Vegas when I am Las Vegas.

Q. You and Desi entered the program at the same time. She seemed she stoic up here. In the locker room she's looking at your bad of goodies. Can you speak to the leader she's been on this team, how it's grown?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: Yeah, we've done a really good job

of coaching Desi of how to be up here on this dias and in front of a microphone. But you get her in the locker room or on the court, and you get to see her personality. What you see is what you get with Desi, which is probably the best thing.

She is unapologetically herself. She was passionate and enthusiastic and just a ball of energy in everything that she does. Our team, we thrive off of that. Essence is our brain, but Desi is our energy. When you've got two of 'em like that, that's how we've had a pretty good team.

But we go as Desi goes, especially from a passion and energy. We need her energy plays. She's got such a high motor, she doesn't get tired. If you watch the first 15 minutes of practice, you'll see that, too. Half the time I'm going to be like, All right, Desi, let's get serious.

Q. In the women's tournament you've seen the format go from home court to neutral sites. Are you okay with the way it's formatted now? You're a double-digit seed, but would you like a team with your record have a better chance to be able to play at home in the first round?

LINDY LA ROCQUE: I'm happy to be a double-digit seed, not face a team on their home court like we did last year.

I think our game is continuing to grow. I understand the host sites, how that is productive for the games, for both games. I mean, I know LSU has such a great fan base. I hope they're there for our game. I know it's at 2:00 on a Friday, but I'm sure they can get a hall pass or something, get out of work early a little bit.

I hope there's a great crowd for our game. We know it's going to be packed for the LSU game, right, sold out. I think there is some good things that come from that. I don't have the answer to it, but maybe that's the right thing to do right now. As our game continues to grow and build, maybe we evolve away from it. That wouldn't be the worst thing either. I think it would create different challenges.

I am definitely excited to play Michigan on what's a neutral court for this first game. We did that last year of playing Arizona on their home court and we felt it. We played really well, but we felt it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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