

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

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Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
Target Center

Penn State Nittany Lions

Carolyn Kieger

Makenna Marisa

Leilani Kapinus

Postgame Press Conference



**WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
TOURNAMENT**
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PRESENTED BY
TIAA

Michigan - 63, Penn State - 61

CAROLYN KIEGER: They got a big future here in this postseason, so I want to give credit to them.

In terms of our team, I literally could not be more proud of the effort that they showed today, the toughness. We've been battling all year to become the team that we were the past two days. I'm just happy that they get to feel what it feels like to be winners and to feel what it feels like to lay everything out there and leave it all on the court, because we've been trying to get to this point of what it feels like to empty your tank. I think they all understand what it feels like and looks like now.

They were a fun group to coach tonight. I hope they were a fun team to watch because they sure looked like it. They did everything right in those last five minutes. Huge big-time defensive plays.

Without our starting point guard, I thought everybody stepped up, these two specifically. Great leadership from them. I thought Aicha Dia, freshman, came in and played huge minutes for us. Chanaya Pinto, had some great possessions for us.

Just comes down to injuries, and we were able to weather the storm and compete. I'm excited for this to be momentum moving into the future. That's one thing we wanted to do this year, is learning how to win. It took us all season to get here, but now we have a taste and it's building from here.

Q. Your press gave Michigan a decent amount of trouble today at times. What were you seeing on the press, and how were you able to make it so effective?

MAKENNA MARISA: Credit to Lei here. She's our defensive captain, and she was definitely our defensive captain tonight and was talking to us constantly and just directing us through everything, talking to us after every possession, during every possession, and that is what kind of kept us organized in the press.

Kind of carrying over from yesterday, we were just feeding off of each other's energy, making sure we were in the right spots whenever we were switching up presses. But a lot of credit to Lei over here being our defensive captain.

LEILANI KAPINUS: Like she said, we've got people come in and play big minutes and make big plays on defense. Aicha's charges, Pinto's rebounds and hustle plays. It was a team effort on defense tonight.

Q. Obviously a tough game but really hard-fought match. Can you just talk about what it meant for you guys to be out with this group of players. You pushed a really strong Michigan team to the final seconds of the game.

MAKENNA MARISA: I'm really proud of this team. At the end of regular season, we were kind of struggling to find our groove, find our identity, and we've really switched our mindsets into this tournament. We just came together and played together.

I'm so proud of Lei over here, Aicha, C.P., everyone. Every single person on the team who stepped up and really came to be in this tournament. We just played as a team, and we played Penn State basketball how we know to play it and how it should be played. So really, really proud of the team.

Q. Makenna, you still have a year of eligibility left. Have you thought about your future?

MAKENNA MARISA: Yeah, I'm planning on coming back. I have student teaching left to do and another year of basketball. We still have work to do to put Penn State on the map.



Q. This was the team's best season in many years. It's the first time the team's advanced out of the first round since 2018. What do you have to say about the season as a whole and what it will mean coming back next year trying to be better?

LEILANI KAPINUS: Like Kenna said, we kind of got in a little rut and we fought our way out. These past two games is the best we've played as a team. I'm really proud of the group, and it's going to have a lot of carryover in the off-season, and this loss is going to give us fire to just keep pushing.

We know what it feels like to play with the best of the best. So we have to use that and turn it into energy for the next season.

Q. Despite going on that scoring drive in the middle of the fourth quarter, you guys were able to shake that off and go on a 7-0 run over the last two minutes to push Michigan to the brink. How do you guys shake that off and make sure you guys are able to still stay in the game despite having spans like that?

MAKENNA MARISA: I'd say that's another thing I'm really proud of the team for, and that has been something we've struggled with a little bit. Just staying composed, staying disciplined. Discipline has been a key factor for us, and today I really thought that our team was disciplined. I'm really proud of them for that, and we showed that we can do it and we need to do it.

Like I said, just proud of the team for kind of preserving through that deficit at the end there and battling through.

Q. You guys were without Shay and Taniyah today. How do you feel you pushed through without your top offensive playmakers?

CAROLYN KIEGER: I'll take that one. I thought they were phenomenal. I don't think they could have led any better tonight. When we needed big possessions, they stepped up, and they did it. They were communicating in huddles. They were completely player led the 40 minutes on the court.

So I'm incredibly proud of the team, but especially these two here. They didn't know, it was a game-time decision, what was going to happen, and making adjustments on the fly. They really showed maturity tonight, and I think that's big for their confidence moving forward.

Q. Makenna, you know how you said you guys showed what Penn State basketball is. As someone who's been here for three years through thick and thin

with the group, what do you think tonight showed for the future of Penn State basketball, and what do you hope to elevate this program to next year?

MAKENNA MARISA: I think tonight showed, first off, that we do have heart. We have a lot of heart. When we come together as a team and we really rely on each other and look each other in the eye in those huddles at the end and just trust each other, then we just work together. We work so much better as a team. That needs to carry on to next year.

I just really felt tonight connected with the team on offense, on defense, talking to everyone, just staying disciplined, like I said. That is going to be the key, the carryover that we need to have into next year and the next season.

Q. It seemed like the best part of your game tonight for everyone was plays that don't show up in the box score. What message do you hope that sends to the Big Ten now and especially next season?

MAKENNA MARISA: I'd say kind of goes back to heart. It shows that we have heart, and everyone contributed. Everyone did the hard plays that, like you said, didn't necessarily, you don't see them in the box score all the time, but we know. We see them, and we give credit to those people, our teammates, who make those hard plays in those moments.

Hopefully that shows that we have a lot of heart, we have grit, and that we play hard as a team.

Q. With 12 seconds left, Michigan had just called timeout. They had the ball. Then you forced that jump ball. What did you see out of that timeout? How were you able to like jump right on that pass to regain possession and give yourselves a chance at the end to send it to overtime?

LEILANI KAPINUS: We knew who the ball was going to obviously. Leigha's a great player. She's their playmaker. So we knew it was going to her. We just tried to close up that trap and get a hand on it and make a play on it.

CAROLYN KIEGER: We've been working on those end-game scenarios all year to get one trap. We knew we had the jump ball, and we didn't want to fall in the trap. We hadn't gotten it right all year, and for us to get it right at the end there, that's big, that's growth, that's maturity.

That, as a coach, was fun to see. They just proved they can do it. So good moment for us.

Q. Coach, you guys were particularly good these last

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two days on inbounds plays. I can't imagine the shot you guys got there at the end is exactly what you drew up. What were you looking for there, and were you thinking three, or were you willing to settle for the two that you got?

CAROLYN KIEGER: We wanted to try to get an earlier shot in the shot clock in order to try to get an offensive rebound. So we obviously didn't want to get it down to the end and take that there.

I thought Michigan did a great job double-teaming Leilani down on the block. It's something we've practiced a lot for her to flash in there and go one-on-one in the post with her strength and physicality. They doubled down, she kicked out, and we were able to get Makenna a look there.

But, yeah, something we practiced and something we executed, but tried to get an earlier shot than we did, though.

Q. Michigan's Laila Phelia played her first game today in about a month. When she's healthy, she's been one of their top offensive weapons. Did you know she was going to play today, and could you talk about her performance?

CAROLYN KIEGER: We did not know she was going to play today, but as always, you scout and you prep for all scenarios. We were locked in and ready no matter what.

She's a great player. I think she's, in my mind, one of the most improved players in the conference. We talk about that as a staff a lot. Her game has drastically improved over this past year. Not only is she, in my mind, one of the best defenders in the league, but she stepped up her offensive game. She's shooting the three better. She's attacking with confidence.

In my mind, it's been really fun to watch her growth and development. But she's no doubt, top three in my mind of most improved players in the conference.

Q. You played Michigan once beginning of January. Obviously the team's changed a lot, but what were you game planning for today? What were the things you liked from that game, and what were the things you decided to focus on when preparing to play them?

CAROLYN KIEGER: Today was especially hard because we didn't know if we would have Taniyah or Shay because we were kind of preparing for all scenarios and kind of even wanted to see how they warmed up. Our team was locked in for plan A, B, C, D, E, and F all the way through.

They did a great job adjusting on the fly, and honestly we didn't know who was going to play for them either. Their two studs were out the past few games as well.

They really showed maturity tonight. I'm proud of them. They followed the game plan and just their execution and their maturity and their focus.

Q. At one point, Michigan had a shot, and it kind of rimmed out. It looked like it was going out of bounds, and one of their players was lazily going towards it, and Leilani came and jumped and threw off the player. Can you talk about her game? It seemed like she was everywhere on the court, defensively, offensively. Just a real boon to your squad today.

CAROLYN KIEGER: I said this throughout the year. I think Leilani has potential to be one of the best players in the country. She's gotten so much better in her off-ball defense. She's always been a phenomenal on ball defender. This off-season she's worked on becoming a great off-ball defender and rebounding. Her next step is going to be getting her team ready to play great defense.

She's shown the last two games she can do that. That's her evolution as becoming a great defender. That's where Indiana as a team has done such a good job at team defense. We need to get to that level, but she has the potential to be the best defender. You see how hard she plays. She can defend one through five. She can rebound. She lays it all out there, and her team feeds off that. It's contagious.

I would go to war with Leilani any day to be in my foxhole, no doubt.

Q. Help-side defense, was that something she worked on? Is that just her being intentional like watching film or how does a player get better?

CAROLYN KIEGER: She spent a ton of time in the film room this season, with Coach Terri, our defensive coordinator, with myself, with other of her teammates, learning angles, learning positioning, when to help, when to drop, whatever it might be.

So I think this year she really took a step in terms of what it takes in order to be an elite level player. Obviously we're not there yet, and we're taking steps on rebuilding this program, and we're not where we want to be yet.

I think they've, over the last week, gotten a little taste of what it feels like to sacrifice as much as you need to to be elite at this level.

Q. Follow up on Shay Ciezki. How did you game plan your team today? Obviously the points were spread around very well. Could you offer some comment, you obviously had a short bench but the bench put up zero points. Wondering if you had anything you wanted to fix there but couldn't?

CAROLYN KIEGER: First and foremost, I thought Makenna did a great job facilitating, seven assists, losing her backcourt mate and someone who's been scoring it so well for us. Shay really came into her own these last two weeks. So for us, big adjustments to have our leading field-goal percentage three-point shooter out and also our primary ball handler.

I thought our bench stepped up in huge ways defensively. So I'm not for one second disappointed in what they brought offensively because they did their job. We put ourselves in a position to win and came down to the last possession. I'm just incredibly proud of them.

Q. I know coaches talk about moral victories, but Leilani, you pointed out, this has been two of your best games this year. You pointed out in your opening statement how well you played in Minneapolis. Are you okay with how this season ends here?

CAROLYN KIEGER: I'm never okay not being in postseason. I said this before I came here, to put Penn State back where it belongs, and that's in the NCAA Tournament, and that's deep in the Tournament. So our work is going to continue.

We're going to continue to fight. I'm proud of our effort today, but this is just the beginning of where we want to go. So for me, I'm really proud of how we've game prepped and planned and played these last two days composure-wise. But I know myself, our staff, and this team has bigger dreams than that.

Q. Today your team utilized the press against Michigan. What were you looking for and game planning with the press, and what do you think made it effective today?

CAROLYN KIEGER: I thought we used our length really well. I thought we gambled when we needed to, and we stood on our feet. We didn't jump in the passing lanes too much. We got down and got in a stance and stayed on our feet and really closed and corralled the traps, and we had great rotations in the back of the press. I thought our forwards did a great job coming up. I think they only got us a couple times for some open layups there where we made some wrong decisions.

Total team effort there with five people being in sync with our scrambles and rotations out of that first trap.

Q. So when you compare these last two days, you guys played your best basketball this season and it was a complete change to what we saw at the end of the regular season, especially when it comes to the physicality and the hustle of the team. What do you think is the main catalyst and the main reason for that change? Just what do you think that says about the team?

CAROLYN KIEGER: First and foremost, the young woman said it, we came together as a group. We came together as a unit. They played team basketball.

I really want to credit Makenna as being our floor general and our leader. I thought she played some of her most composed basketball of the last four years. It doesn't matter if it shows up statistically or not. She was very composed. She had huge and-ones at certain moments. She played her best defense of the year. Obviously Leilani led the defense down there.

I would just say for us as a team we knew we didn't play our best basketball the last month and a half, and for us to regroup and come together and play the way that we knew we can play shows a lot about our character and what we set out to do.

But like I said, we're not pleased. We're not satisfied. We want to be playing in March, and we want to be in that NCAA Tournament.

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