

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Iowa Hawkeyes

Lisa Bluder

Caitlin Clark

Hannah Stuelke

Postgame Press Conference



minutes and how you guys played those last two minutes of regulation especially?

CAITLIN CLARK: I feel like, when you get into the groove and into the game, those thoughts kind of don't even cross your mind. You're just there. You're playing. You trust one another. And a girl helped off of Kate quite a bit. Trusted her to make the shot, and she knocked it down. I think that was the first three she made all night.

That kind of fed into her honestly going into overtime. I think she had another two threes or maybe three threes. Those are the moments you live for.

Our fans, they were incredible. They kind of willed us to this victory. They never gave up on us. We never gave up on each other. Things weren't always pretty. Things weren't always great. Especially in the first half, I didn't shoot the ball well.

You've just got to wipe it, let it go, come back and respond. I think the biggest thing was we just started running our offense in the second half. It was a lot better. It was a lot cleaner. We got good looks. We made a few more shots.

You have to give credit to Nebraska. They played really well and made some tough shots. Anything we tried, it seemed like they always found an answer for.

Q. Caitlin, between the Big Ten titles and the regional championship, you have quite a few pieces of net. I'm just curious what you do with them, where you keep them.

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, I have some in my apartment in Iowa City, and most of it is back home with my parents. So nobody can get their hands on it. Got to keep it in a safe spot. Usually I cut a couple extra to give to my dad or my brothers or my mom just to keep it around, in case I lose it too.

It never gets old cutting any net. I feel like we're pretty good at that now. Hopefully we get to do a few more times here coming up in late March.

Iowa - 94, Nebraska - 89

THE MODERATOR: We're going to start the press conference without Coach Bluder. We'll start with questions for Caitlin and Hannah.

Q. First of all, I'd like to thank you guys for bringing all this glory to Minneapolis. It was a wonderful experience. I just want to ask both you ladies, this was a prime example of a team game. Everybody stepped up. How are you guys going to look at this game and go forward?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it was really gritty and resilient out of our group. That was the biggest thing. Obviously the first half we were just very out of sorts in all sorts of ways, whether it was on defense, whether it was offensively.

We just found a way to win, and that speaks to the team that we have, the maturity we have on this group. We were down six or seven, I don't remember exactly what it was, with two minutes to play, and we never gave up.

That's what I'm probably the most proud of is we found a different way to win. Once we got into overtime, we kind of knew you just go and take it now.

So, yeah, proud of this group.

Q. Caitlin, I think you were down to eight with a little over two minutes left. You outscored them 10-2 at the end of regulation. You scored or assisted on every one of those shots. I think you had a three, Kate had a three, you had a layup, and Hannah had a layup. Can you talk about what was going on in your mind knowing how much was at stake in that last two



Q. Caitlin, you can obviously face a Big Ten team in March Madness, but if that's not the case, what has this conference meant to you?

CAITLIN CLARK: You never know what might happen in the NCAA Tournament, but obviously the selection committee usually keeps us pretty apart from each other for the most part.

If this is my last time playing in a Big Ten game between two Big Ten teams, then what better way to end it all? You have the overtime, we fight back, bad shooting, good shooting, defensive stops. I mean, it just really had it all on the biggest stage.

Can't be happier for our group. This was the only way we could end it. So just really grateful.

Q. Hannah, I saw you were very emotional at the end there. What was going through your head?

HANNAH STUELKE: I think we just have worked really hard all season. It's just a huge buildup, and I get really happy and really excited.

CAITLIN CLARK: Hannah's really emotional. That's no surprise.

HANNAH STUELKE: I am, but it's great being here.

Q. Caitlin, you guys really haven't had many or if any games like this where it's a struggle all the way through. You can kind of feel that March tension closing in down the stretch. To get a game like this, it being right before the NCAA Tournament starts, how beneficial, I guess, can this be even though I'm sure it wasn't always the most fun?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think in the first half it wasn't always the most fun. It was kind of frustrating at times.

I think that was kind of our problem. We weren't really smiling and having fun. The second half we flipped what we were doing, flipped the script, and had a lot more fun. Things started going our way. We were just a lot more patient.

Also, if we want to reach our goals in March, we are going to find way to win that aren't always pretty. You got to be resilient and gritty. Everybody's given us their best shot all year. Our team is very prepared for it. We have been through it, we're ready for it. Just proud of our group. We weathered every storm we had. We kept fighting.

Things fell our way there at the end. Like you said, it

definitely felt like the March tension in the air, especially with people stepping to the free-throw line late in the game. That's what makes it so fun.

Q. You're down eight there with two minutes and you hit that step-back three. What does that do for the mindset there on the court?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it gave us some life more than anything. Coach Bluder called a timeout, and we all kind of took a breath for a second. Eight points and five points seems a lot different.

Then I think we ended up getting another stop, and Kate gets a three and we get another stop, and I come down and make a layup. I don't know if it all happened in that order, but it was something similar to that.

I just think this team is never out of a game. No matter if it's 15 points in two minutes, whether it's 5 points in two minutes. We have the offensive firepower to be in any game, and we all believed that, we all knew that, and we never gave up. That's what I'm the most proud of honestly.

Q. I know in Dallas last year you were able to retrieve the basketball that you threw.

CAITLIN CLARK: This one went in the stands, didn't it?

Q. I don't know where that went this time. You going to get that one back too?

CAITLIN CLARK: Probably not. Beth Goetz came up to me and said you, make it hard to find the basketball when you just chuck it into the stands.

Q. (No microphone).

CAITLIN CLARK: No, I just chucked it. I hope some fun has it. Good for them. I don't know.

Q. We've been talking since Sunday about the short turnaround and the short time line. Just curious what the schedule looked like, what your nights were like last night as you were trying to recover for today?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, hot tub, cold tub, get back to the hotel, scout, eat, massage, and go to bed. Really quick turnaround. Obviously it was a 6:30 wakeup for us with the time change included into that.

Not something we've ever really dealt with before. That's kind of how it is. I mean, Nebraska probably felt it worse than us. They were playing their fourth game. We were playing our third. I think everybody was definitely feeling it

in the fourth and in overtime too.

I'm sure we'll have a couple days off to rest and recover. So proud of our group for just giving everything they had, especially being down a starter this whole weekend. Sydney Affolter steps up and plays the best basketball of her career. I'm really proud of her.

Q. Caitlin, you're probably not thinking about this right now, but there's a pretty good chance of winning this tournament as the No. 1 seed for you guys, which Iowa hasn't had in a long time, since '92. Can you talk about just what that means in terms of having that seed and how that maybe affects the path going forward.

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, whether they give us the 1 seed or give us the 2 seed, I don't think it really matters a ton. You're more so kind of concerned on the draw you get. I feel like that's almost more important.

But it's whatever the committee decides. You have no say in that. You get what you get, and you'd better be ready to come out and fight every single night. That's just what it is.

I think our group knows well enough that NCAA Tournament is the best postseason tournament in all of sports. If you don't have it for one night, your season's over in the blink of an eye. We're really only guaranteed one more game as a team, so you've got to come in and prepare every single day like it's your last. I know this team will do that.

We just want to keep having fun with each other and enjoying these moments. We know how long and how hard it is to get to the Final Four but how much fun it is at the same time. So I think having that experience under our belt is going to certainly help us too.

Q. Caitlin, you've talked about turning the page, whether it's a tough quarter of some consecutive missed shots in a row. I'm curious if you can reflect on your time in Iowa the past four years.

CAITLIN CLARK: Probably my worst half, yeah.

Q. Your words, not mine. As you look back at your past four years in Iowa, how much better are you at that in terms of maturity?

CAITLIN CLARK: A hundred times better. Coach Bluder would say, especially this game and Penn State game, to be honest, I don't think we win those if you have freshman and sophomore Caitlin. I was never able to let it go and move on to the next. That was really something I always struggled with and something I knew I had to get better at

for this team to be where we wanted to be. That's where we grew the most this year.

As a senior, you go through it. You know how it goes. There's good days, there's bad days, there's great shooting days, there's not as good. When you're in a championship environment, you have to let it go and move on to the next.

At halftime I reset my mind, let it go. I knew some shots weren't going to go in. That's just how it works. Obviously I'm proud of myself. I've put a lot of work into being able to do that and letting things go and relying on my teammates and not pressing as much.

Honestly, that might be one of the things I'm most proud of over my entire career.

Q. Caitlin, given the run that you guys had last year in the tournament and given that this is the last one for you, do you expect a different feeling heading into the dance this year?

CAITLIN CLARK: To be honest, not really. Somebody asked me that yesterday too. To me, this isn't a farewell tour. This is just Iowa basketball having fun and playing the game. Like I don't want it to be all about me. I just want it to be us.

Yeah, I know in the back of my mind this could be my last game every single time I step on the court from here on out, but if I think like that, I'm not going to play my best basketball. I'm thinking we've got another game after this. We've got to win. We've got to move on. And just focus one day at a time and enjoy every single second.

My career has gone so fast, and I don't want to miss any opportunities. I think there's a lot of season left if we want to reach our goal. So just enjoying that and believing in that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Caitlin, Hannah. You can head back to the locker room. Congratulations.

Coach, do you want to make an opening statement?

LISA BLUDER: I do want to say Nebraska just played an outstanding game. It took everything we had to win this game obviously. You all saw it.

Then I have to acknowledge our fans. They are amazing. They show up in Carver. They show up here. They show up in Dallas. They show up everywhere. We are just so thankful for them. I know I keep saying it, but I can't express it enough. They give us energy. They give us confidence.



When we win, we want to share it with them. We really do.

I thought we fought hard tonight, and we had to. It's not very often we have fought from behind. That was our biggest deficit at halftime. We just tried to reset at halftime I thought they came out, and that third quarter was really good, really good.

Then we lost the lead, and they fought back again. I'm incredibly proud of our group.

Q. We always talk about how important in the postseason guard play is, and you guys are down eight with just a little over two minutes left. It's your guards, not -- Hannah was in there too, but it's your guards that just make big play after big play with Caitlin, with Kate, with Gabbie. Can you just talk about having that kind of experience, especially at the guard play.

LISA BLUDER: The leadership out here tonight was really good, the second half exceptionally good. Caitlin hits that big three. We call timeout. We're down five. We call a timeout. Now everything is possible with defensive stops. Gabbie Marshall comes to play defense. She worked so hard out there. She needs to ice bath out there for two days straight. She worked really, really hard.

Kate couldn't believe it when she was so wide open on that three. She looked down to make sure she was behind the three and then pops that one for us. She had two really crucial threes for us.

Syd, I'm so proud of Syd too, stepping in the starting position and getting in the all tournament team. She's just been waiting. She's been waiting for her chance. Again, I believed she was the Sixth Player of the Year in our conference, and she showed it tonight.

Q. Coach, would you agree with Caitlin's assessment that freshman, sophomore Caitlin wouldn't have won this game today?

LISA BLUDER: I agree. I think she has matured so much mentally. That goes into emotions too. We talk all about time control, what you can control. You can't control officials. You can't control that sort of thing. She was able to bounce back.

Honestly, she didn't have a very good first half. You can maybe keep Caitlin down for a half. You're not keeping her down the whole game. There's no way.

Q. One of the early season story lines was Hannah

Stuelke at the foul line. She goes 11-for-13 in the tournament, knocks down two really big ones really late. What were your thoughts when you see her at the line? Have you seen that growth kind of come to go this point?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, and we weren't supposed to give the ball to Hannah in that situation. That's my fault. I probably should have subbed her at that point, so completely my fault to put her in that situation.

You know what I'm so proud about with Hannah? She misses two, her only two of the tournament, steps back up and makes two. That growth and how much at Tania has worked with her. Hannah is just special. She has 25 points tonight. She's going against one of the best posts in America, has nine rebounds for us. She played really well.

Q. Iowa had 25 assists on 33 made shots today. Really a lot of assists all tournament. What's it like for you as a coach to see that teamwork, especially as it fuels the rally today?

LISA BLUDER: I love passing the ball. The first half, we didn't do that as well as what we're capable of doing it, but I just think it's such pretty basketball when you're all playing as one and everybody's on the same page passing the ball.

It wasn't today's game but yesterday's game, there was probably like seven hockey assists before Gabbie Marshall knocks down the three. I watched that play a couple times last night. It was just beautiful passing.

You know when they're passing like that, they're in sync. There's synergy on the floor when they're passing the ball like that. I love that. I don't like just playing around the three-point line. I like to be able to draw and dish and have good floor spacing. So I think we did a better job of that in the second half.

Q. Lisa, kind of going back to Hannah, just the mental growth. You talk about she misses two free throws, gets an offensive rebound, make the two free throws. Just from her confidence, you talked about all year confidence is a big thing for her. It seemed like she stepped in her moment, maybe grew up a little bit more today too.

LISA BLUDER: Hannah Stuelke is so talented. Really the only thing holding her back was her own confidence and mental. We just keep pouring into her because she is such a beautiful athlete. I'm just so proud of her. I just want her to continue to own it, allow herself to be great. That's what she has to do. And she will be great.

Q. You talk about Caitlin playing emotionally, and obviously that can be a good thing and a bad thing. The growth has been so key for her. What are some of the points that you saw her learn how to play with in a good way and how much of that is work she's done on her own versus conversations she's had with the coaching staff?

LISA BLUDER: I think you asked, it was about how has she matured?

Q. Yeah, playing with the right kind of emotion.

LISA BLUDER: Caitlin is very like passionate, she is passion. She had to learn how to play with emotion but not so much that it took her over the edge. She's learned to do that.

I mean, it's been a lot of us talking about you've got to control the controllables. You can't let other people take you out of your game. She's worked hard on it, but I think my staff has held her accountable, and I think Kate Martin has held her accountable to that as well.

When your peers can hold you accountable, sometimes it means a whole lot more than when it comes from coaches. That's what Kate Martin does so well, she isn't afraid to hold her teammates accountable. When you're talking 20-year-old to 20-year-old, that's hard to do. I think Kate Martin has helped her growth as well.

Q. Lisa, you guys mentioned you really haven't had a game like this where you're behind the whole way. The March tension closes in a little bit. I know this team is confident in its experiences and what it's been through, but to get a game like this before the NCAA Tournament and survive, how pivotal can that be for what's ahead?

LISA BLUDER: Any time you come out of these situations positively, you can fall back on it, right? Even at halftime we were down 11. We were up 12 at their place. We went back to the opposite. Their place, and they came back and got us, so let's do it to them this time.

Any time you can draw on past experiences, especially favorable ones, it definitely builds your confidence.

Q. You think back to October, we were asking how are you going to adjust without Monika and McKenna? And here you are all these months later winning another Big Ten Championship and potentially having a No. 1 seed. Right now you guys are in line for that. Can you talk about the growth of this squad to be able

to do that, and what would a No. 1 seed mean to you to have that?

LISA BLUDER: Everybody knew how much we lost last year, and everybody kept talking about how much we lost. We kept saying look how much we have. We have a lot.

Hannah was ready to burst on the scene. You have the best player in America. Kate and Gabbie, God bless them, they come back for another year because they feel something special. Syd Affolter just kept getting better and better as the year went on. Kylie, a year after her surgery now.

So, yeah, I think we just focused on what we have instead of what we didn't have. We felt like we had a good team. Certainly our foreign trip helped us, having those ten extra practices, going overseas and playing. All that really helped.

I think we do deserve a No. 1 seed. If we don't get it, oh, well. It's okay. It's okay. That's life. We can't control that. But I think it would just mean a lot to our program and how far we've come to have that recognition.

But if we don't get it, we're going to play the same basketball we would if we were 1, 2, 3, 4. It doesn't matter.

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