

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

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Coach Lisa Bluder

Women's Basketball Press Conference

LISA BLUDER: Good morning. Thanks for being here, but these kids have classes, so that becomes the priority over you guys getting your sleep.

Here we go again. Whether we want to or not, it's time to turn the page and go on to another season after last year's historic season. What a way to begin this season. Right now we're starting ranked in the top 6 in the country and considered the Big Ten favorite, although this conference is loaded, and there's going to be a lot of surprises along the way.

We start this season with every single game sold out in Carver-Hawkeye Arena. We start this season in a week and a half with about 50,000 people joining us in Kinnick for the Crossover, and as you all know, we start the season without 40 percent of our starting lineup. But we also start the season with the nation's best player in Caitlin Clark.

Caitlin won every award possible last year. I'm so proud of her for that, but I'm almost more proud that she was an Academic All-American. She was the CSC Academic All-American of the Year last year, and it's no surprise that she's been named as the preseason Big Player of the Year, as well.

But a pleasant surprise is that we have Gabbie Marshall back, somebody that we weren't expecting to have back a year ago, and so that's really nice. She's returning for her fifth season of eligibility.

Gabbie has been voted a team captain this year. She's considered one of our best defensive players. She led the team again last year in steals. She's a knock-down 3-point shooter. You saw her make seven 3s in the semifinal of the Big Ten championship last year when we defeated Maryland. Without her we probably wouldn't have been there.

We're glad to have Gabbie back.

Another pleasant surprise is Kate Martin, who returns for her sixth year of eligibility after missing her first with the



ACL. So glad to have Kate back.

But Kate is honestly one of the strongest leaders I've ever been around. She's a culture builder. She's playing like a pro right now. She really is. She's knocking down 3s. She's physically defending hard, rebounding. I think you're going to see Kate just jump off the stat sheet this year.

How do we fill the void of Monika and McKenna? That's what everybody wants to know, right? I think there's a number of options. Addi O'Grady played some of her best basketball in the NCAA Tournament last year. At 6'4", she gives us a greater defensive presence in the middle, but I'm also going to beg you -- I'm going to ask you, I might even beg you to not compare her to Monika, just like four years ago I sat here and I begged you not to compare Monika to Megan.

Monika came of her own. Give Addi time to come of her own. Addi is a good basketball player. She's a darned good basketball player, just like Megan was, just like Monika was. But comparisons don't do anybody any good, so just give her a little bit of time.

Other good options in the post include Sharon Goodman, A.J. Ediger. What do we do with the power forward position? I think that one is obvious. I think everyone saw last year how good, how athletic, how fast Hannah Stuelke was.

But this year I think over the summer she became a better basketball player, and that's what we needed for her to become, and I think now she understands the game better. Her shot is better.

I think that we can use Hannah at the power forward, or if we want to go fast, we can also use her at the center position.

This team has depth. Molly Davis returns for her fifth year, and Molly is playing very well right now. She looks so much more confident than last year, knocking down 3s, passing, getting to the rim.

She's a player that we have to find more time for on the court. Molly can really play the 1, 2, or 3. So we need to accomplish that.



We have shooters with Taylor McCabe coming back in her second season. We have depth with Sydney Affolter, and Kylie Feuerbach is also back after sitting out with a knee injury last year.

We're also hoping for an injury-free year for Jada Gyamfi, but we have lots of depth we feel like and lots of options for us to go to.

We have a tremendous schedule. Five teams in the Big Ten are now ranked in the top 25. Three of them are in the top 10. Our nonconference schedule includes facing No. 9 Virginia Tech, a team that was in the Final Four last year on a neutral court in Charlotte.

We also will be hosting Kansas State. They're ranked 25th in the country right now. And last year they gave us a one-point loss at their place, but they do return their center, their 6'6" center, so that's going to be a battle.

Thanksgiving gives us three games in Florida. We have the potential to play Florida Gulf Coast, who is always a great team. We have the potential to play North Carolina, ranked in the top 20, and also the potential of a rematch against Kansas State.

I think another game to mark on everybody's calendars would be our game in Des Moines on a neutral court against Cleveland State who went 30-5 last year. They are a really good basketball team.

We'll be playing at Iowa State, at UNI, hosting Drake. But 11 of the games on our schedule are against teams in the top 25 in the country right now. So we have a very, very challenging schedule once again.

But I know that Carver-Hawkeye Arena will be as tough a place for anybody to come into and play with every game being sold out.

Of course we're looking forward to in a week and a half going out into Kinnick and having the opportunity to play outdoors for the first time ever and playing in front of hopefully 50,000. That's my personal goal, and hopefully we'll get to that.

I think it could be a lot of fun for everybody involved to be a part of an attendance-breaking record.

We lost a lot to graduation, but we also have a lot to be really, really excited about.

I will open it up for questions.

Q. Megan and Monika were very much down on the

block, not a lot of dribbling type of post player. Addi O'Grady is a little different, she can play a little further out. Do you see the offense changing a little bit at all with their versatility down there?

LISA BLUDER: Not a lot, quite honestly. I agree with you. I think that Addi is a little bit different player, but Megan and Monika both came out to the high post and both went to the short corner and were able to shoot those shots pretty well, too. I do think that was a strength of Addi's, though.

Q. What is your pregame ritual before every game?

LISA BLUDER: I'm not superstitious, thankfully, because wow, being in this business this long and being superstitious, that would be pretty bad.

But the only thing that I do is I follow kind of a rigid routine because it's more because I want to be on time for everything more than anything superstitious. The only thing that I do, maybe -- I don't know if you'd call this superstitious or ritual -- is I like to pray with assistant coaches before every game, with Jan Jensen and Jenny Fitzgerald. So that is the one thing.

Q. The ticket sales speak for themselves, but just in terms of your popularity, attention, you name it, things are unparalleled right now. How are the coaches and players handling all this?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think you're right. If you start thinking about the big picture, it can get a little overwhelming for anybody. These are 18-, 19-year-old young women.

So I think us as adults, we have to kind of keep it in perspective a little bit, and I think they kind of -- your emotions rub off on them, there's no doubt. I think as a coach you have to lead in that way, and to us, we're trying to enjoy it.

You've heard me say this before. I've stole this quote from Billy Jean King many a times and, in fact, I'm reading the book right now, Pressure is a Privilege. So I think we have to remember that, that we're in this situation of facing pressure because we've done well. Let's enjoy that. Let's rejoice about that.

Try to enjoy it and not think about the overall picture, but just enjoy every single day. It sounds so simplistic, but I think that's the way we have to handle it.

Q. Addi had a good European trip for you. Has she separated herself from the other post candidates as far as being a starter at the 5?



LISA BLUDER: If I had to name a starting five right now, she would be there. But I wouldn't say there's a huge separation between the three of them. And even you could put Hannah in there, too. They're very much -- Addi is probably winning because of experience and height, but she did have a very good foreign tour, and I thought she played very well in the NCAA Tournament.

We needed her there. That's why she's ahead of the group right now. But quite honestly, there's not a huge lead right there.

Q. You mentioned Kylie Feuerbach in your opening statement. Seems like it's been so long since we've seen her on the court. Is she 100 percent right now, ready to go?

LISA BLUDER: I would say so. In practice -- for one thing she's elected not to wear a brace this year, which in the past we've had our players that are coming off ACLs wear braces. She's elected not to, and I think mentally that's helped her and maybe us to forget about it. She is playing very well. She had a great practice yesterday, actually, a really good practice.

Q. When you look at a team like this that finished the way it did, the popularity that's ensuing, there could be added, as you've talked about, added pressure, scrutiny, more social media interactions in a negative way. Have you had any discussions with your players that now comes because you're having more people, more attention, that that could be a negative, whereas in the past you've had such a close-knit community that's been more supportive when things got sideways a little bit?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah. Remember, things -- we started the season last year, I think, ranked fourth, so we're down from last year. So less pressure already, right?

You know, and we had some losses early last year, and we bounced back from them really well. I think in athletics you always go back to your past and use your past experiences in how you got through those.

But talking with the team, we've talked about the pressure, we've talked about pressure is a privilege, and we've also talked about, will you quit looking at social media. You can look at -- I've told this to my team. You can look at 200 things on social media. 199 can be great, and there's one that really stinks, and you'll remember the one. So don't read any of the 200.

I know they need to be on social media to brand

themselves, especially in this day of NIL. I understand that. But let's just not go down the hole of -- rabbit hole of reading all the stuff from anonymous people.

Q. How will you as a staff manage the whole Caitlin hoopla as far as it goes with the rest of the team? She gets so much attention. Keeping the locker room right. I'm sure you probably have real mature girls playing for you, but are you mindful of that kind of thing?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, Caitlin who? (Laughter).

No, I agree. I think there would be a possibility of having turmoil in your locker room with a superstar, but I think it helps us because we have dealt with a superstar before. We had Megan Gustafson on this team. She was the national Player of the Year. Certainly Caitlin's popularity has exceeded that, there's no doubt.

I think it speaks volumes that Gabby and Kate elected to come back and wanted to play with her. That shows you what kind of teammate she is. That shows you what kind of person she is.

I think the players all respect her so much because they see her. She's working hard. They see her the first one in the gym, the last one to leave. She's putting in her time. They understand that she can do some special things.

I think that eliminates the jealousy because she is a good teammate, and I think that helps quite a bit. But we will talk about it, yeah. Caitlin has a little bit more attention, but when her light shines, it shines on everybody in that locker room, so let's all enjoy it.

Q. I think in your opening statement you said you were a little bit surprised that Gabby elected to come back. Why were you surprised that she elected to come back for a fifth season?

LISA BLUDER: You know, it was later in the year that she made that decision, and so she could have -- she graduated, she could have went on.

I think anybody that graduates and decides to come back, I just really think that's amazing, that they want to be a part of this team and a part of this program again, and I love that. I really admire that.

Q. Your guards off the bench, you've got a lot of options with Molly, with Sydney, with Kylie coming back from injury and you mentioned Taylor McCabe. How do you kind of balance trying to put the right lineup on the floor? All four of those players probably



deserve minutes.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, you're right, we have a lot of people that deserve minutes, and there's only so many minutes to go around. There's an exercise where you put -- you have each of your players -- you ask them how many minutes you think they deserve and you add up all those minutes and it's way over 200. And it's kind of a realistic approach to showing, demonstrating that, listen, you're not going to get the minutes that you think you deserve or you probably should deserve.

It's just when you're playing on a really good basketball team with a lot of depth, that's one of those things that's really -- you're giving up of yourself to be a part of this basketball team, and it's something that we have to manage as coaches.

We have to really do a good job. That falls on us to do a really good job with that.

Q. I think it was during Beth Goetz's introductory press conference, she was talking about you being the one who came with the idea of Crossover at Kinnick. Were you the brain child behind that? Where did that notion come from?

LISA BLUDER: You know, it really started when we came back from the trip and then we had a celebration in the Pentacrest. There was 9,000 people. I was like, 9,000 people are coming to a celebration that there's no game or anything? Obviously we all know and it's in the back of your mind that wrestling did this not so long ago very successfully, so it can be done.

I'm just really fortunate that I work at a university -- and when I went to our athletics director, Beth Goetz, that she said yes without blinking and that all of our administration took on so much added work. This is an away football weekend, and it's going to be treated like a football weekend almost.

A lot of extra work for our staff here at Iowa, and they didn't blink, and I am so blessed that I work at a university like that.

Q. Why did you want it?

LISA BLUDER: Why not? How much fun? You're going to play exhibitions again. And first of all, all the money we make is going to go to the children's hospital. Why not give my women an experience that not many people around the country get to do? We're going to be the first women's basketball game televised in the country.

I think it brings national attention to not only our program but to the University of Iowa.

Why wouldn't we try to do this?

Q. After Caitlin was National Player of the Year last year, what are the things you think she wants to accomplish this year?

LISA BLUDER: What does Caitlin want to get better in? You know, she's never satisfied, but that's the beauty of basketball. You never play a perfect game. There's always things that you can work on. I think she understands that.

She's constantly working to get better. It's not like she's sitting back and enjoying this time of her being the National Player of the Year. She wants to get it again. She's wired that way, where she just always wants to do better.

I don't know if I answered your question for you or not, but --

Q. I know she's got the ball in her hands a lot, but you were looking to maybe take advantage of the mismatches at times because of her height. Is that something you feel like you can do?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, like last year I tried that and it didn't go so well. But now in practice she's trying to do it herself a little bit, so maybe it's coming back to her. But that is an area where I think she could -- but at the next level, and I'm not preparing her for the next level because that's not my job, especially, number one. But she won't be able to do that at the next level, either. But she's trying it now, and she knows she can get to the free-throw line that way, too.

Q. When do you expect a decision from her about next year?

LISA BLUDER: What is it, 48 hours? Is that when she has, 48 hours after our last game or after the Final Four? I forget what the rule is. I don't know what the rule is. I'm not worried about it. If she comes back, obviously, I'd be thrilled if she comes back.

I want her to come back. Everybody wants her to come back.

But it's her choice. If she chooses to go on, we have a really good recruiting class coming in. I feel very confident.

Yes, anybody would want Caitlin Clark -- to coach Caitlin Clark another year, obviously.

Q. Clark has gone through just an unprecedented summer, great tournaments, won every award there is. Are you concerned at all about there being some sort of fatigue in that sort of a lead-up to a season?

LISA BLUDER: Hmm, interesting question. I could see her being more disappointed if she doesn't match what she did last year. I could see her being that.

I don't see a fatigue. I don't see I'm satisfied with what I've achieved so I'm just going to rest on my laurels. I don't see that at all in her.

For her, she loves the game so much. She's passionate about playing. I do not see that.

But also, and maybe this is a different way to look at it, we had our foreign trip this year, and so we had 10 extra practices. So I started practice a lot later this year than I usually do, and I was trying to avoid some of that team fatigue, not just for Caitlin but for everybody. Because we do have more of a veteran team really, and we had those 10 extra practices. So I started our September practices a little bit later to avoid what you're talking about.

Q. With basketball in general, teams are hanging banners. This is a once-in-a-lifetime season you had for most teams. How do you keep the team as a whole not feeling like if things go south in a game, look what we did last year. We're going to go in the Hall of Fame. Just as a team, what do you see here that lets you feel that having the goal of National Championship or bust is not unattainable because you went there last year?

LISA BLUDER: You know, I never try to compare teams to teams. I just want this team to be the best team they can be. Whether that's winning a National Championship, making it to the Sweet 16. I don't know what this team's best capabilities are.

Of course we set high goals, but I'm not like if we don't get back to the Final Four, it's a terrible year. I don't believe that. I think so much more is put into a basketball season.

You guys all judge it on wins, right, and certainly the fans judge it on wins; but as coaches, we love wins, but we also look at a lot of other things.

Do our kids graduate? Are our kids great human beings? Do they grow as women while they're here? Are we mentoring these women so they become the next generation of great female leaders? That speaks to me. That's what gets me up in the morning.

If I had to get up in the morning and think, Golly, are we

going to make it back to the Final Four this year, that would be tough to get out of bed. But when I get up in the morning and think, Wow, I have an opportunity to make an impact on 14 young women, that gets me excited.

Q. Where is Ava Jones in her recovery? What is her role on the team going to be this year? Any update what she's going through?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, Ava is really in a lot of therapy right now. She's had some surgeries. She's continuing to have surgeries. She has some planned surgeries. Unfortunately she's not going to play this year. I think we all know that.

But she is a part of this team. She's a scholarship member of this team. She's at practice when she can be. But we schedule a lot of her therapy sessions during practice just so she can make sure she's in classes. She's doing well academically.

It's a situation that's a tragedy, and we're going to try to support her as much as we can to get her better.

Will she ever become a basketball player? Who knows. That doesn't matter to me. Getting her as healed as we can is our responsibility now.

Q. We've seen the Caitlin Clark effect on the road. Like in the Big Ten, for instance, an average of 3,500 fans around the Big Ten, in some cases a lot more. And we've seen her around young girls, whatever. How do you balance taking it to a higher level, being the standard bearer, elevating the sport and elevating women's athletics, but also balance that with I'm just a player, I'm just going to go out and play, I don't want to have that kind of responsibility? How do you balance it? How does she balance that?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think my women understand I always want them being a basketball player, being a student and being a role model. There is a balance there that they have to try to achieve. But when you're playing basketball, you play basketball. Don't worry about -- I tell my team all the time, be where your feet are. Don't worry about any other thing. When you step on that court, you are the best basketball player you can be. Just like when they go into chemistry class, don't worry about basketball, worry about chemistry. So be where your feet are.

I don't want her to -- I think she understands she's the face of basketball. She can't help but understand that.

But I don't think she's so consumed with it that it takes away from her game. I think she's still going to play with

passion. She's going to play with emotion. Sometimes as we know, that emotion is good, and sometimes that emotion isn't good. We know that, right? We all have some damn-it tee shirts on, you know, in our closets. But I don't ever want -- somebody told me don't say whoa to a racehorse. I'm never going to do that to her.

Q. You mentioned Hannah Stuelke over the summer. Where have you seen her improve?

LISA BLUDER: Three-point shooting, free-throw shooting. Her shot in general has been -- and just her confidence, the way she carries herself on the floor. I want her to put her shoulders back and know that she owns it.

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