

Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Coach Niele Ivery

Maddy Westbeld

Sonia Citron

Hannah Hidalgo

Postgame Press Conference

NIELE IVEY: My voice is going, but this is just a credit to God. This is a blessing. This is what we've all, I know, prayed for. For myself personally, I've prayed to be in this moment, to win a championship. Also just obviously winning a championship with this team. This was the vision coming in, taking over this program, and to see it manifest in four years has just been unbelievable.

I'm so grateful for this team, their commitment, their buy-in, their loyalty. I love how much we are together, our culture, and the success obviously comes with great people and people that work hard.

It's almost like I'm speechless but I am talking. It's so incredible to be in this moment and to say we're ACC champs when this league is so tough and it was such a hard fought week, three games in a row, the resilience of our team, the adversity we faced yesterday, and for everyone to step up was fantastic, and I'm so proud of them and so grateful to be their coach.

Q. Go into detail about that adversity. As I understand it, you had seven people to start this game with. One was a walk-on. You soldiered through it all. How did you make it happen?

NIELE IVEY: Like I said, they're very resilient, this team, and having another player go down, they knew that they were going to have to have high volume minutes. They did a great job of taking care of their bodies this week, recovery, just being smart, play more zone today, knowing that the numbers were going to be low.



Credit to Nat, Natalija Marshall and KK Bransford for coming in and making a huge impact, especially Nat, her first start of her career today on a championship stage. She's unbelievable.

This team is the type of team that does whatever we need to help us win.

Unfortunately we've been in this situation before last year, had some adversity, lost two of our starters. As a coach, I know how to adjust, but just the team, everyone rising to the occasion and everyone stepping up, but credit to Natalija and KK for stepping up big for us today.

Q. Can you compare winning a championship as a player versus as a coach?

NIELE IVEY: Wow, it's just amazing to even think about it. Because I've been dreaming about this, this is one of my goals was to win a championship as a head coach, as well.

It's the same because I'm so happy. I'm so ecstatic about it.

But I'm going to say as a coach, actually just feeling like I can bring out the best in them, because as a player I can control myself, I can control how I handle the ball, shooting and all that kind of stuff. But when it's out of my control, my goal is to bring out the best in them and for them to be the best versions of themselves.

As a coach, I feel like it means more that I've got a chance to mentor them.

Q. Hannah, being able to add that you're now the ACC MVP, what does that mean, just the entire season of what you've been able to accomplish in just your freshman year, and did you expect to have the year that you have had?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, it's truly a blessing from God, and obviously I give all glory to God and I try and stay humble, but I'm excited for just another accolade.

All credit to my teammates because I wouldn't be able to



do it without them, too. It truly a blessing just to be here in this position.

Q. You're the first Black woman to coach a team to the ACC championship game after Kenny Brooks became the first Black coach period to do it last year. Black coaches are leading the way in this conference right now. What does it mean to you to be a part of that legacy and that kind of progress, and what message do you hope this sends to athletic directors across the country?

NIELE IVEY: I mean, that's a huge honor. It's a huge blessing. I love being a pioneer, breaking barriers. That's really important to me.

Again, I'm grateful. I wouldn't have this opportunity if it wasn't for Notre Dame, Jack, and this group. I'm just grateful. You don't get a chance to be in this position without someone believing in you, and Jack Swarbrick has believed in me from day one to just having this opportunity.

Representation matters, and for me to be able to represent -- being a Black woman, I think it's great for inspiration, it's great for young girls to see, and hopefully it gives more people of color and diversity more opportunities to lead programs.

Q. Sonia and Maddy, your poise, your experience out there made the difference. Can you speak to what you -- where did you get this sense of experience to lead the team today?

SONIA CITRON: I would say even as a freshman we were kind of thrown into the fire, so we've been in situations like this a lot. So I think it just comes from doing it. I'm a junior; Maddy is a senior now. We've played a good bunch of games.

It's something we're used to doing, so...

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I would say kind of the same thing. We've been thrown into a lot of big fires, and we've been expected to come out and kind of just stay that poised character.

So we've been challenged a lot, like she said. We step up to it. We've been tested, and we continue to just thrive through that and fight through that.

Q. Hannah, describe the last couple of minutes when the ball was in your hands because basically you broke a tie twice and hit the game -- what essentially was the game-winning free throw because they needed a three to force overtime. Talk about going through

what you did to make the championship happen.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, so we noticed the ball screen was working, so we kind of cleared out and spaced out and just put Baldwin in a ball screen, and if they collapsed, the kick out for the shooter was open, and if not, then it was a one-on-one for the drive.

It worked, and so I made a move on her and was able to get all the way to the basket.

The ball screen was just working.

Q. For coach and Maddy, River Baldwin came out in the third kind of blazing and obviously with Kylee down at the big position, what were you able to do to slow her down?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, she's a good player. I think we had different plans to throw at them, throw at her, try to get her off her step. But just being physical, trying to push her off her comfortable position off the block. We looked to trap, so my guards did a good job of doing that. It was just staying together, staying to the plan of what we had.

Q. Notre Dame women's basketball just has a championship DNA, and Hannah, coming into this culture, what did your leading players, your veterans, teach you to allow you to fit right in and do what you do? What did you learn most from them?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, they have a lot of trust in me. I learned to just kind of have confidence in myself. Right when I came in, they were like, Hannah, shoot the ball, score the ball. That was really big for me.

It means a lot for my coaches and my teammates to have so much trust in me and want me to score like that and kind of be the lead and be the head and just dish the ball out and make everyone better. The trust they instill in me is just amazing.

Q. Now that you have been able to really click on all cylinders, especially in the later half of this season, obviously winning the championship today, getting this break in between going to the NCAA Tournament, how can you even build further upon the kind of momentum that you guys have?

NIELE IVEY: Well, this week, I'm going to give them rest because we need it. Obviously been a really physical weekend, so going to be fresh coming into the weekend or later at the end of the week and then start getting back to work, work on some things, find some areas to get better, lots of shooting, lots of conditioning to prepare for selection

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show. I'm excited that we get a couple days off because it's definitely been very hard to go three days in a row. But they'll be good.

Sorry, not that much conditioning. Just a little bit.

Q. Sonia, with all the questions about Hannah, as a player who's been around for a while, freshmen come in but they don't always do things like she's done. At what point was there a moment where you said, this is a little different this year, what she's going to be able to do?

SONIA CITRON: Yeah, Hannah is a special player. We knew before she even played a game. Just when she came in in the summer, she just has a different mentality, so in workouts, in practices, we kind of just knew she was going to be special.

She's just different. I don't even know what to say.

Q. How do you think she's handled all the attention that's gone with accolades and people talking about the women's game and who's sort of the next big thing with Caitlin Clark heading out soon? Hannah has gotten a lot of attention. How do you think she's handled that?

NIELE IVEY: I think she's handled it really well. Credit her family and the foundation. She's very humble. She loves this game so she just wants to compete, so everything that's coming her way is because of what she's been able to accomplish and do.

It's not something that she seeks. It's just she has, like she says, she's different. She has a light about her. I think she's doing a great job of managing it. Again, she's got great leaders and she also has position coach Charel Allen and myself that try to help her through it, because it is a lot for a freshman, and I think she's done a phenomenal job of handling it.

Q. Hannah, what did you learn from the last NC State game when you were 4 of 19 from the field that helped you in today's game?

HANNAH HIDALGO: What did I learn from last game? I learned to use my left a little more. I noticed in the other game that they iced me and sent me to my left a lot.

Watching film with Coach Ivey and just realizing how I can score off of that. So they sent me to my left, so what I did was I snaked it and I just had the big -- just hold the screen for a little bit longer, so I was able to snake in and get to my jump shot or kick out corner or get all the way to the

basket.

So I learned to use my left. I'll get back in the gym.

Q. For Coach, I think at media day I asked you, with all your depth, were you thinking about being a pressing team, but obviously you don't have depth, you've reinvented a lot. Can you talk about that reinvention process this year and also this game going from the third quarter to the fourth quarter when your defense turned it up?

NIELE IVEY: Right, going in with a full roster I definitely was looking at trying to be more disruptive full court, but obviously roster numbers, situations changed that. Had to adjust.

But today, I looked to go to the zone. I knew I was going to go to the zone early just to make sure that we stayed out of foul trouble, and I felt like River Baldwin was doing a great job of just getting a lot of seals.

I was worried about foul trouble, so I sent a double-team which really worked. We got a couple great traps from Soni, great trap from Hannah that resulted in a steal, and I thought that was a big different in that shift defensively just throwing something else at them.

Q. For coach, your next win if you get it in the NCAA Tournament, that would be your ninth win in a row and that would tie your season-long winning streak. Curious, how well do you feel like you're playing right now? It definitely seems like you are playing your best ball of the year at the right time. How has that come about? Five ranked wins in a row, as well, in those eight in a row.

NIELE IVEY: Right. Actually our last matchup with NC State I think shifted our team. It shifted the culture, the atmosphere of that game. We didn't play well at all. We kind of were off -- we weren't really on the same page that game.

So just putting the mirror in our faces, we really kind of rallied together and just talked about what do we need to do better for us to finish out the season well, so everybody individually gave more, sacrificed more, and committed more to our vision, and that's why we're in this position right now.

I'm grateful that we had that shift, and I'm grateful that we got better, and every day just got better and better every day, but it's just a credit to our leaders, and it's a credit to everyone buying in. We needed that second layer of buy-in at the end of the season because we knew we had

a really tough stretch, so I'm proud of our resilience and the way that we've battled since that loss.

Q. Coach, after last weekend's regular season finale versus Louisville, after the game you told the fans you're not sure what's to come but you're really excited and you need that support whenever that future is, whether that's next year or in the coming days. What's your message to the fans as you look ahead to hosting games in a few weeks?

NIELE IVEY: My message is go get your tickets, please. We would love a sold-out arena. That would be great for women's basketball. Obviously we have in my opinion some of the best fans in the country, and they have so much love and support for our team. So we would love for them to come out and just have a good crowd and a good showing for women's basketball, bringing it to South Bend.

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