

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Michigan State vs North Carolina

Thursday, March 21, 2024
Columbia, South Carolina, USA
Colonial Life Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels Coach Courtney Banghart Deja Kelly Alyssa Ustby Media Conference

COURTNEY BANGHART: Glad to be here. March is what this is all about. Our guys have been through a challenging non-conference schedule, obviously very challenging conference schedule, and this is the third chapter of the season.

Super proud to be sitting alongside two really great representatives of our program and our institution and of our team. So all that they've done is being recognized in this type of environment, which is really awesome.

We know we got a great opponent. Michigan State a well-coached. They are cohesive. They have dangerous threats all over the floor and also come from a tough conference, so and really tough first-round matchup that should be fun for both sides.

Q. Deja, how long did you let yourself sit with the loss to Miami over the past two weeks?

DEJA KELLY: Oh, my gosh. It was a few days. I think we all needed to few days literally away from each other. Yeah, it stuck with us for a little minute. I think us older ones, especially, us vets. That one stings.

We knew we had to put one foot forward and worry about someone else next and put that behind us and focus on getting better within that kind of last week and a half-ish.

Q. Alyssa and Deja, can you talk about specifically what lessons you learned from that really tough Miami loss?



DEJA KELLY: I think just knowing or core four, we have to play well for us to be successful, so I think that took a lot of individual accountability on our end.

But just knowing that we have to be able to lead our team through tough games like that. Even if we're not playing well we have to find ways to win. I think that's where we had a dropoff throughout the game.

Even though shots weren't falling, things like that, there was opportunities for us to find a way to win and we didn't do so. So just knowing going forward into Friday and this weekend, I think just knowing that we have that responsibility.

We have to play well. That doesn't just mean shots falling. That means in a variety of ways how we can impact the game to make sure we come out with a win.

ALYSSA USTBY: I would say a couple things that we took away are we have to be intentional on offense, so that is getting into the actions we want and getting the shots we want for the right people. Also being urgent on the defensive end.

I think those two things would be really helpful for us to pull out some of these closer games, and understanding that these games come down to those details, especially in March. Like the little details are big moments and big things that matter.

Q. For Deja and Alyssa, you probably got a crash course on Michigan State the last few days. What do you see from them on tape? What kind of challenge is it going to be tomorrow?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, Michigan State, like Coach said, is a well-coached team and they have a lot of threats all on the floor. So our little crash course is understanding how this team plays and who they are. That's one thing that's kind of -- there are pros and cons of playing somebody you never played before. We're adjusting to like their style -- trying to see what their style of play is like and forming our game plan that way.



We are really excited to play a new opponent.

DEJA KELLY: Yeah, we know that they can score at a high clip. I think our biggest focus going into this game is the defensive end. We have to be what Alyssa said, urgent on that end and knowing that ignites our offense, our transition attack, and us being able to get some quick scoring out of our defense.

So we know that they're a good team. They look connected on offense. Defensively they're tough. Just a tough team. So are we. We just know we have to match the intensity and match that energy.

Q. Alyssa, coached mentioned this is kind of your third season, non-conference, ACC, NCAA tournament. This is the team that has had a lot of ups and downs this season. How do you see it as a fresh start and sort of, hey, this is something new, sort of 0 and 0. How do you get at that mentality going into this?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, I mean, I think a fresh start is good way to describe it. We don't need to necessarily reinvent ourselves, but redefine ourselves. Understanding what that means for us is again, urgent on the defensive, intentional an offense, making sure we rebound, getting out in transition, getting back to the things that we consider or bread and butter and really focusing on those, and, again, just defining ourselves of who the team we want to be in March is.

Q. Deja or Alyssa, Michigan State has players that can shoot the three, spots 1 through 5. What are the challenges there defensively?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, I think when you have a team that has a lot of shooters it forces your defense to play a little spread out. I think containing our one v. one matchup will be important, and making sure we don't fly out at shooters. If they're going to drive by us that could lead to more problems down the line as well.

So just locking into personnel and containing our matchup.

DEJA KELLY: Yeah. You know, they have shooters, but they're good basketball players so they can put out ball on the floor as well. I think playing straight up will be to our advantage.

We're a pretty connected defensive team, so if we just do that and be in the gaps and help the help side, help the helper, I think that will be really important for us to be successful on that end.

Q. For Alyssa and Deja, just what specific ACC matches this season do you think compared to the pace and scoring ability that Michigan State has?

DEJA KELLY: As we all know, the ACC is pretty good I guess you can say. Let's see, I would compare them to probably like a -- gosh. I think like a -- I'm trying to think now.

I think a team that -- sheesh. Help me out here. A little bit of Florida State, even though three point shooting wasn't what they did, except against us. (Laughter.)

I would say probably like NC State. They play fast in a way. They have bigs that can shoot it, like Mimi Collins and Madison Hayes, and they're guards obviously. They play fast. They can get to the rim really, really well.

You think I would compare them kind of to them. I don't think Michigan State is as big as them. They're pretty big.

ALYSSA USTBY: I would kind of compare them to Virginia. I think similar to Virginia, they have like post players that are three point threats and they also have a really strong presence down low in the post and posts that like to put the ball on the floor before they make a move.

They have a dynamic point guard that can distribute the ball, can attack downhill, can probe and help make her teammates better.

Q. Deja, you mentioned that the team had to take some time away from each other following the Miami loss. How did you personally take that time? What did you do and what were you thinking?

DEJA KELLY: I watched a crap load of film. I did, in my house. I watched a lot, a lot of film. Just saw different -- I look at a lot of different things when I watch film, but just I think those days were for me to individually get better mentally, physically, see how I can be better in different areas.

So I think that's kind of -- that's what I did with my time, because I know I have to play well to help us be successful and help my other teammates play well for us to be successful as well.

So knowing I can impact the game in different ways, seeing where I did, where I didn't, just specifically in that game, and trying to carry that over into our practice the past week and a half. I think trying to lead with my voice and also just trying to be intentional with the different areas where I know I needed to see some growth there.

Q. Same question as for your players. What have you seen out of Michigan State? You probably didn't spend a lot of time before the tournament brackets came out even know their style. What have you seen out of them?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Actually, ironically, Robyn is one of my good friends, so I've been rooting for her. We were on the phone last night when I was on the bus. It's like, gosh, a team you root for now you're playing in the first round.

I fortunately had seen a few, not full games, but you peel in when you're traveling or when you have the 6:00 game and she has the 8:00 game, while you're waiting for your media to finish up or not.

I had seen bits and pieces and now I've watched them a lot closer, but knowing her success at Bowling Green, at Ashland, I mean, this is a team that plays to her personality. They're competitive. They're joyful in how they compete. They can really spread the floor.

She's got really good pieces. They connect well. I'm not sure that all of them would be as great on other teams, but together they play really well. It's a team this can put up a lot of the points. They use pressure to try to get some in transition.

So they try to disrupt you. It's not just -- I think they're offense is so good you give a lot of credit to their offense. It's a two-way team. We were laughing on the bus, does this make you the worst nine seed if you're playing South Carolina second? I guess they took a lot into this Big10 tournament.

They're a whole lot better team than a nine seed and she knows that we know that. That makes for a good matchup. Does that answer your question?

Q. Just wondering, after the Miami loss you get back to practice and before you know who your opponent is, what is sort of the emphasis and focus for practicing without knowing who you're playing next?

COURTNEY BANGHART: It's one of the best weeks that coaches have because it's the only time -- basically once the season -- we already know -- I don't, but someone on my staff knows who we play to open the season next year.

It's the only week of the whole entire year where you can work on yourself in true earnest. You don't know anything of who you're playing and their strengths and weaknesses.

So we spent a lot time on us. I know that's cliché coach

talk, but it's real talk. When you build out your non-conference schedule you're still in the off-season or in the fall you're building to the various ways that you'll need to play over the first month of the season.

Last week we focused on us and where do we need to sharpen, where do our reads need to be better. You can use analytics to see where are the mistakes and where are you most effective.

So we've been able to tweak some things and try to put them in situations to be more successful given what their strengths and weaknesses are. We gave them a few days off. We haven't had consecutive days off since April, since last April, right? So that was nice, too.

So it was a good week. For a coach it's a chance to just focus on your team. It's a nice thing.

Q. So kind of going off that, what do the conversations look like with the team as a whole, with individuals, in order to get back to playing kind of as guys as you're saying?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think the conversations between coach and player are really sacred. I'm not one that shares those on blast. I know there are those that do, right? For me, the conversations I've had with Deja and Alyssa and their teammates, that's made for them and I.

Same thing when we're all behind one closed door and sharing what we do well and what we don't do well and what we need.

So those conversations, I guess I'm in a position of I love the sacredness of those. But whenever you're progressing I always say you have to be both self-aware and self-accountable. So in any way, our conversations are pretty much centered on those things.

Let me help you with self-awareness and self-accountability, right? That happens in small group, individually, and it's ever going. It'll happen today at 1:45. They start again, these conversations.

I would say self-awareness and self-accountability, and the nuance of that is sacred.

Q. Coach, who does Michigan State remind you of that you played already?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Gosh, I say opponents as so unique. I think they probably answered it well. There are a variety of different -- I think the up-tempo defensive play of the NC State and Florida State, and Florida State's



dangerous without really a dominant big, big. And then Virginia has more ruggedness to them.

So it's why you schedule -- if you look at our non-conference schedule, it's up there as one of the best in the country. They have you have the ACC, and arguably in its long tradition, it's one of the stretches of ACC basketball.

We've really been battle tested. As much as these guys are saying you have to redefine, you have to also lean on your experiences. That's what life is about. Your experiences are meant to be lived in the moment, and then they connect and collect to become who you are, right?

So I will continue to connect for them the ACC and non-conference and similarities of certain teams throughout in how we need to continue to focus going into this game.

Q. You touched on this in bits and pieces in some answers, but do you like the fact that your conference tournament may end on Thursday and Friday and then it's going to be another two weeks before you get back to action? Would you like the schedule to be more like the men do it, where they finish the major conferences finish up this past weekend and then a week later go right into the tournament?

COURTNEY BANGHART: There are a lot of sides to that. I think as long as the committee is not apathetic, because as you get closer you have to just start sliding people into. I don't know how that affects the accuracy of it.

How hard these people work, and I'm talking these people, the courageous student-athletes. Coaches are expected to. We are paid to. These guys are doing it out of passion only.

The seeding is important. It has to get right. So anything that will eliminate that opportunity I don't like because it's not fair to have the wrong seed.

And then when I was in the Ivy League we played the last weekend and I wasn't happy then. I guess I'm just a not-happy. That's just how this works. But I think the biggest thing is the seeding has to get right.

Whatever the committee needs, if they need a full six months, we'll do it six months before. That's how important I think the seeding is.

Q. Wanted to ask, too, obviously when the season begins you get to this point and you're happy.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Oh, yeah.

Q. But the challenges that coaches face these days with the new realities of the portal and NIL, does it make the job a little less satisfying or is there some bumps that probably weren't there before? How do you handle that?

COURTNEY BANGHART: You just didn't can't be change resistant. The job I signed on for 20 years ago when I became a head coach is not the job now. The job I signed on Carolina five years ago is not the job now.

You either evolve or you get out. There have been coaches that have determined the option B was their preferred path. For me, I've adjusted and recognized and adapted. It's so easy to look at the things that make it really challenging and our jobs hard and maybe less satisfying, or you lean into what the newness of this is.

How I can help or student-athletes lean into for example the NIL. How I can help them learn to lean into that women now have a seat at the table. The table is corporate. The table is brands. The table is equity.

I'm stretched, but I'm leaning into that opportunity they have and trying to help them find their voice and find their presence there.

In the portal, that's a real challenge, because the exit culture is happening at all institutions, not just in athletics. It's everywhere.

So we can say, gosh, good old days is when you really like leaned into what's hard. Well, then I wouldn't have Lexi, Indya, and Maria either. I guess the uncomplicated answer is that it's a very different job than we signed on for.

The really simple answer a little day I don't feel fulfilled by it, I'll leave. We are not held hostage by our professions. The coaches that are so negative about it, it's bringing everybody down. Just get out then. Do something else.

We're highly marketable human beings. It's an evolving new business now. Lean in and see what it is. We're being paid, too, by the way, better than we were ten years ago. Or get out.

For now I've enjoyed leaning in to being stretched to the Max.

Q. How would you describe the team's mentality going into this week and who have you seen step up in practice?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Good question. You know, we're a team that has four four-year seniors. Pretty remarkable. I don't know what that looks like for other rosters, and so there is an enormous sense of buy-in for the Carolina across their chest. Especially as we just alluded to, that's just so incredibly rare. That's not because Deja, Alyssa, Anya, and Z haven't had other options or other people calling trying to steal them. It's because they believe in the Carolina across their chest.

So there is an element of pride and shared ownership for this journey that I really respect.

Then you've got the younger guys, new guys to the roster. This is Maria first NCAA tournament. Like how, right? So you get a chance to bring people along with their first as well.

This team's problem has never been mentality. They have been incredibly resilient. We started four different point guards. It's the one position you want to have one and then just play them all the time, right?

And so we've had to really shift and match. What you guys see month to month is different. We've had to really evolve. I've grown a lot. It's never been a mentality. I think sometimes I play fatigued mentally and physically. We come at that pretty honestly with three guys having to play 40 minutes a game.

And so I've really tried to help them not only rest mentally and physically, but own that. That's the self-accountability piece. That it makes sense that you would be mentally fatigued. You may say you're not. I have the self-awareness that that's how it's playing out.

I think how it's been in this week is they're owning that and they feel a little bit more refreshed in that, and hoping the version they show is not that, and knowing this is an opportunity of a lifetime.

There are people that have coached as long as I have and never coached in the NCAA tournament or played for two, three, four years and never been to the NCAA tournament.

This is an honor, and our effort needs to match that.

Q. You mentioned you gave the players a couple days off right after the ACC tournament. What did you coaches do?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I'm guessing ya'll can guess what we did. We two things: we either recruit or get fired. There is no other option in this business.

So I was on planes and rides, and I would love to say I was watching my son play basketball or my daughter play lacrosse or sitting at the lake, but those would be inaccurate answers. I was recruiting.

That's another thing. If you don't like recruiting this isn't a business for you. You have to be okay with getting your heartbroken. The only way you can get your heart broken is to really lean into it.

When we're not practicing, we're off, coaches use that time to recruit. At least my staff does.

Robyn and I shared a cocktail in the Turks and Caicos last May. That's where I wasn't. I don't think she was there either. That would've been great.

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