

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels

Courtney Banghart

Alyssa Ustby

Maria Gakdeng

Media Conference

North Carolina 59, Michigan State 56

COURTNEY BANGHART: Where do we start? Obviously the stars of the show are to my right. But you know, just this team's been through a lot, obviously, and winning -- I thought Michigan State was a little under seeded; that they were really good, and I mean -- sorry.

The seed was too high for how good they were, and so we knew we had a challenge on our hands, and you have two choices: You can try to outscore them or you can try to stop them. I think a lot of people try to outscore them because of their potent offense but our guys, we sort of said to know them is to defend them, and these guys totally locked into the defensive game plan so that we could make really tough looks out of them.

So just a really good defensive effort. I thought we set the tempo the way we needed to. We had to play through -- we wanted to play through our bigs because of their size and that's easy to say and hard to do and just a huge credit to these two, Teonni, who came in and gave us a lift on the interior.

It's Maria's first NCAA Tournament game and look what she did, and Alyssa Ustby is just a noun at this point. So Alyssa Ustby.

Q. When you grabbed that final rebound to officially seal the game, as well as working with Teonni to grab the second-to-last rebound, what was going through your minds and what were you feeling in that moment?



ALYSSA USTBY: When Teonni and I were on the free throw line there, we knew we had to come up with a rebound if in the case we miss, and Deja doesn't miss very often.

But I told her, be ready just in case. When she got the first one, I was like, perfect, yes, let's do it again. When we got the second one, I was just very proud of our girls, because we fought the whole game and we earned this one.

Q. You had more offensive rebounds than their entire team. What was working for you inside?

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, definitely having my height advantage part of the game plan, knowing they were going to shoot a lot of shots and we'd have to rebound.

So using my body, getting into them and getting those rebounds was going to be important, kicking back out for open threes, I think that was very important, for extra possessions and getting us up in the game.

Q. It does feel like you guys followed the game plan to a T if it was to attack in the paint, I think 18 of your first 21 points in the game were in the paint. When you get a game plan like that, as one who excels in the paint, how excited are you to attack this game?

ALYSSA USTBY: I'm so excited because then once we start pounding them in the paint in the beginning like you pointed out, then I get to like kind of dissect and find where they are trying to over compensate where they send a double and Maria play really well this doubles and finding our teammates when we are cutting to the basket. Indya had a great heads-up play when I was driving to the basket. I felt like we made them collapse a lot in the paint and that led to other openings. Was definitely very excited that we were getting more looks down there, but even more excited for the rest of the team because that means we're going to have some other openings that we can take advantage of, as well.

Q. Maria, we talked yesterday about this being the first NCAA Tournament you said you wanted to do this for



yourself, and how did that emotion play into today and what does it feel like to successfully do that?

MARIA GAKDENG: I think just mainly playing with confidence is something that I struggled with before but coming into the tournament I know it was a fresh start for us and we could go on a really good run if I show up, showing up for my teammates was going to be really important today.

So that's kind of who I stepped up for, and I'm glad that it turned out well and we got the win.

Q. Yesterday you talked about getting the team back to its bread and butter, especially making plays in transition. How did you see that kind of having an impact today?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, I think it starts on the defensive end for us, when our defensive intensity is good, then we get live ball stops, which we love to run.

So we'll get out wide, we'll rim run and that just opens up so many more opportunities for us. I felt like we did a great job taking advantage of that in transition but I do think it started on the defensive end for sure.

Q. You talked about struggling with confidence throughout the season. In the last two weeks specifically with practice, I guess, is there a moment you can pinpoint when you felt that shift happening and confidence grow?

MARIA GAKDENG: I would say just hearing it from my teammates throughout the season; that they believe in me, hearing from the coaches that they trust me and believe in me. Being able to instill that within myself was one of the major things. In practice over the last couple weeks, we've been really competitive, going at each other in the post knowing that it's going to be a really physical game down there.

So knowing that and getting to it in practice was going to be important for us going into the tournament.

Q. Most of the season, you've had some choices where you have a big lead and given up. What were the emotions as that lead was coming down, and then when you staved it off the at end?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, all teams that we play against are going to go on runs and momentum is going to shift. So I don't necessarily would identify it as us like giving up points or giving up a run. I would say that we are learning how to adjust to adversity and to the changes of our opponent.

So if they are making an adjustment on offense and they are like hitting the pot for the three, then we have to make the adjustment. I felt like tonight, or this morning, we were quicker -- we were quicker at making those adjustments, and so I think that's something that's really important for us, especially the ones inside the lines, to recognize those patterns and to recognize those changes and be able to adjust on the fly.

Q. I think Michigan State has scored less than 60 points, maybe four times this season or something like that. What were the keys defensive?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, I mean, we knew, gosh, they are a dangerous offensive team and not just against whoever, right. They are scoring 90 against Iowa in the last eight, and they do it two ways. They force turnovers and then they are able to really get into the paint for their selves and others. They take, what, 999 threes or twos at the rim, take about 300 threes and then about a hundred of everything else, right.

So we really wanted to close off and not give them all those layups. So we wanted to force zero right, wanted to make sure we had a contest on 40 and wanted to make sure that we forced counters and dent allow step-throughs against certain guys.

Really, to know them is to defend them is sort of our priority, and also, we wanted to be active. I think we sometimes, understandably, you can see it through the shifts of the game, we get tired and I get it, right. That's what we're dealing with right now, right.

So they are tired, and then we get reactive. So it's just helping them understand that you still are going to be tired when you're defending, whether you're active or reactive, it's just that active will probably lead to offense, right. Super proud of them. We shot 8 or 18 from the free throw line. That's just a hard game to win in the tournament if that's what you're going to shoot but they finally were able to find a way. How many did they end up with -- not even 60. That's pretty remarkable.

Q. Can you speak to the quality minutes off the bench by Teonni, and also Barker and Poole's contributions off the bench?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Teonni was huge. I think they are length, I thought she contested really well. We talked about walling up. Didn't want to foul. They go to the free throw line a lot, so we wanted to use her length. We said a wall up is a win against her because she's so long and can elevate and she did that to a T. 40, she guarded her really

well. So she was totally locked into the game plan. You could tell. She's missed a lot of times but she's still finding her rhythm because of her injuries and you guys are getting a glimpse of what she can do for us.

Anya is so experienced. You can count on her. When you need her, she's ready.

And then Syd, that kid is a walk-on who we just gave a scouting report to, and the fact that she could give almost five minutes, means five less minutes someone else had to play, so it's huge. Any minute that anyone off the bench can give us in a positive fashion helps our team a lot.

Q. Maria mentioned that coaches worked to install confidence in her. Could you discuss the conversations, especially over the last two weeks in preparation for the game and installing that confidence in her.

COURTNEY BANGHART: You know, we start with the idea that confidence comes from preparation and the work you put in, right, and she puts in, and so she's prepared. She puts in time outside of practice and works on her skill work, and that's usually enough. So it's reminding that confidence comes from that.

When you still struggle with it, it's helping her see that, who else do you need to believe new, right. You've got your teammates and coaches who need you, and when you're in and your teammates, other teammates aren't, it's because they need you to play well, right. And so you know, it's a constant reminder to her that, like, otherwise I've made a recruiting mistake, and I don't try to make many of those, right. And then also that confidence comes from the work you put in, and she puts a lot of work in.

Q. How would you say that Alyssa played into your game plan for out-rebounding MSU today?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Alyssa, her relentlessness and pursuit has been hard to guard for everyone in our league. These guys finished fourth in the Big Ten, right, and we feel a sense of pride in the ACC; that we have got a really deep conference. There's a lot of teams that are really good and we proved it today.

But part of that is because Alyssa does that all the time. She does it against the No. 1 team in the ACC and she does it against the worst team in the ACC; she does it against the fourth team in the Big Ten. What you guys saw from Alyssa is what I get to see literally every day. We always say practice the way you play. That was our key over the last ten or 14 days is we are going to practice the way we are going to play from a schematic and effort

standpoint and you look at Alyssa, and she's just like, mm-hmm, because that's how she roles.

Q. Was that first half some of the best basketball your team has played this season?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, I think -- I thought we played -- there are other games which probably are irrelevant at this point but for them in terms of the preparedness that they played with, right, and the confidence that they believed in to the game plan, and then how they moved to our spots offensively. They sort of put all three of those things together.

So yeah, I thought, you know -- I thought it was -- well, liked watching the first half better than the second half.

Q. What are you looking from her --

COURTNEY BANGHART: Gosh, I'm almost boring. I spent so much time working on Michigan State. You know, I know some coaches prepare for all the teams at once and I know my staff has been working at preparing for all the teams. That's not how I am, right. I focus on one game at a time because I ask my players to do that, and I hope they respond to the leader they choose.

I know South Carolina from last year, and they have been great for the women's games, but in terms of the nuance of it, that's going to be good for me to talk about tomorrow. I don't know them as well as I need to now.

Q. What's going through your mind when it gets a little tight in the final minute, a three goes down, like what are you thinking right there?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, I mean, so we missed two free throws and gave up a three and we got it in and we turned it over. You look at it, and say, it's going to be more interesting than it needed to be, right. But at that moment is not the time to have a teaching moment. That's the moment you're going to lead into the next one. You're going to switch at the point of screens to force that. We wanted to have; they were going to get a shot, it was going to be late. I thought we fouled 22 on design, and then they hit that three. So I think when you watch it back, you'll see that we had hands on them.

But you know, when they wanted to advance it to get it in the hands of our free throw shooters and they left the backcourt open, and so we put a fast Teonni there because she can dribble out of that. The end game, you know, I think we'll probably fast forward that part.

Q. I know you know Robyn pretty well --

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

COURTNEY BANGHART: Very much so.

Q. And I saw you had a moment with Osmond.

COURTNEY BANGHART: I did a home visit with her when I was at Princeton, so I've been in her home. I wanted her to run our one so I told her how proud I was of her, the career she's had, because she's really shifted positions because that's what her team needed her to do.

She's getting to play the three, four right now, right. And then also, I got to hug our Chancellor who we are sharing with Michigan State and so you know, yeah, Robyn and I, our families got together for ice cream last night, which I know people can say, you're not competitive enough. We both have small kids; she has two and I've got three. They see us compete all the time and they need to see that humanity and friendship matters.

I wanted to hammer them today and they wanted to hammer us, right, but that doesn't mean the day before, we can't act like our friends and our kids can't see us and we are going to compete all we got but we can also have a friendship.

The two families got together and they ended up playing some silly games at the table and it was an outdoor -- I'm sure we were more of a mess to them, not that they were hoping. But it's just, this business is hard. You're competing all the time. Your kids are seeing you compete. You're competing in all facets of the business, right, and so when you have someone who you have great respect for and a good friendship to, you don't like playing them on game day, I'll tell you that. But that can't change who you are when it's not game day.

How about the ACC y'all?

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