

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - West Virginia vs Iowa

Monday, March 25, 2024

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver-Hawkeye Arena

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Caitlin Clark

Hannah Stuelke

Media Conference

Iowa - 64, West Virginia - 54

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to an opening statement from Coach Lisa Bluder.

LISA BLUDER: First of all, I said it earlier in the week that West Virginia was not an 8 seed. There is no way. That team is really good. Mark's done a great job in his year that he's been there, and they played really, really hard.

But I do think that was one of the better defensive teams we've seen all year. I'm so proud of our team for only having six turnovers in the second half against that pressure defense. That's keeping your composure, especially when they tied it up. This might have been our lowest field goal percentage that we've ever won a game with. We found a way to win in a different way, and we won with our defense tonight.

We outrebounded them by seven. We valued the ball. A little bit shaky to begin with, but we valued the ball. And our defense was pretty good tonight. Everybody talks about our offense, but I think our defense was pretty good tonight.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to questions for Caitlin Clark and Hannah Stuelke.

Q. This is for Caitlin. At one juncture you just kind of -- you went back to the free-throw line when Hannah was shooting, smiled, you made a heart. At that point, did it feel like you could almost relax, that you saw the victory within your grasp?



CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think for sure. I think our team is really good about playing until the final buzzer. I'm really proud of Hannah. She missed two free throws early in the fourth quarter and comes back and makes four in a row.

That's tough to do, as somebody who's really worked on her free-throw shooting. We all have confidence in her to be in those pressure situations, and really step up to the line and make four in a row after missing two in a row is tough. She extended it to a three-possession game for us, and that gives you a lot of confidence.

With the way our defense had been playing all night, I knew, if we could extend it to three possessions, we were going to be really good from there on out. So I'm just really proud of her honestly.

Q. Hannah, you talked about how you've really been working on your free throws. What have you improved, and what was it like to step up with the game on the line and be so crucial in that moment?

HANNAH STUELKE: I think it helps with my confidence a lot. Going into these big games, I'm going to need to knock down free throws, and I think this is a stepping stone to that for sure.

Q. Caitlin, I was talking with Kristin Meyer earlier this year, and she said you've always had this ability to watch what was happening in the crowd and in the court. She said, if someone was eating popcorn in the 12th row, you'd know. You've done that in college. You're looking into the stands a lot. Did you do that more tonight, I'm wondering? Also, when you do that, what are you or who are you looking for?

CAITLIN CLARK: I try not to look in the stands the best I can. I don't know, my family has always been people that have been there for me through the ups and downs of my journey. More than anything, they just look at me and motivate me, and that's a sign of reassurance. Or I'll look to our bench and get that too.

But I've always been one to play to the crowd. That's just who I am. That's kind of what I do, an entertainer in a way.



I always want to get them going.

I thought our crowd was tremendous tonight. They really willed us to this victory. I think I do that. At times I'm not even aware as much. Sometimes I'm just looking around. But I think it's being able to lock in at the same time. Sometimes I don't even notice how loud the environment is getting because I'm so focused on the court.

Q. This game went completely different than a lot of your guys' games this season, 64-54. How are you able to get it done in a game that's completely different from the way you normally do it? Secondly, where does this win rank in terms of toughest ones mentally and physically to get through?

CAITLIN CLARK: This is definitely up there with the best of them mentally and emotionally and physically, grinding this out and getting the win.

To be honest, looking back on our journey last year, to me, this is one of the hardest rounds in the NCAA Tournament. Everyone is really good. You're expected to win. You're on your home court. You have all the pressure in the world. They have absolutely nothing to lose to come in here and upset us. That happened my sophomore year, last year, we were in a game that was even closer than this one.

Our group wasn't flustered by any means when they tied it up. Yes, we had so many opportunities tonight where we got to a ten-point lead, a seven-point lead, and we couldn't figure out a way to extend it. Honestly, we just didn't shoot the ball very well. We didn't make shots we normally make. We didn't shoot it too great from the three-point line.

I think that should give us a lot of motivation. West Virginia is a really good basketball team. We found a way to win. We changed up our defenses. We got big rebounds when it mattered. We made big free throws.

I think that's the biggest thing. There's a lot of positive to take away from this when maybe we didn't even play our best basketball or look as pretty. That's more fulfilling of a win for us than going out there and winning by 30 points.

Q. For my 9-year-old who threw up this morning on the way to school and couldn't come to the game tonight. She's curious to know, you've reached a number of the goals that you're looking for in your college career. She's curious to know, as am I, what are your goals once you get to the WNBA?

CAITLIN CLARK: Oh, gosh, I think that's a loaded question. I think, first and foremost, my focus is solely on

this team. That was one of the reasons I made this decision of letting everybody know like I'm leaving after this year. I can have a lot of closure. I could walk off the court tonight and know this is my last game ever in this arena.

That's sad, but at the same time, when this journey does end, the WNBA, it's a quick flip. You've got to be ready for it. Yeah, I think the time will come when I sit down and think about all my professional goals and aspirations, but for right now, my goal is to help this team win a national title and have a lot of fun doing it and smile on the way out and enjoy every single second because it's gone in the blink of an eye.

I can't believe I'm a senior and I just played my last game here. So I think that's the biggest thing.

Q. Hannah, Coach Bluder alluded to it earlier how the offense generally gets a lot of attention with this team, but defense certainly ruled the night. What does that say about this team in terms of defensive prowess when the offense gets a lot of attention?

HANNAH STUELKE: I think a lot of people think we're only an offensive team. And we do work on defense all the time. I'm glad we got to show that tonight. That's what won this game. So I'm really proud of that.

Q. Caitlin, were there any times during the game during breaks in action, maybe not while it was going on, but where you did try and soak it in a little bit, where you did try and be like this is different, this is not ever going to happen again? Did you ever have that?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think at the beginning of the game during the national anthem, that's just something I tried to do all year long is soak in our crowds and look around and enjoy it and kind of take a deep breath. You look around, and it's like standing room only. The place is so hot because there's so many people in there and there's no air conditioning.

I just look around, and that's when I try to soak it in the most. Then obviously the game starts and you're not really too worried about it. At the end of the game, I would have never left the court if I wasn't forced to get off. I think those are the two moments that I soaked it in the most.

Q. Caitlin, I think only seven assists for Iowa tonight. Not something you see very often in the whole history of Iowa basketball. Can you talk about being able to -- you mentioned having to win a different way, but when you have to win, when you don't have the ball movement you guys are used to having?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it's definitely difficult when people are out-pressuring and denying us like they were. There's definitely something we can learn from. There's going to be teams we face going into the next round that are going to pressure us the exact same way. I thought we should have ripped through, we should have been a triple threat. We should have been ready to make passes.

Also, I thought we drove downhill really well. That's what you're going to get when people are pressuring you. Yeah, seven assists is not Iowa basketball, but at the same time, we didn't make many shots. We only made 17 shots. We made five threes. I was the only one to make a three. Like I said, our offense wasn't stellar by any means tonight.

But I'm just so proud of our group. Our defense was really phenomenal. I know we'll get right back to it. It's kind of an anomaly. That's what happens sometimes, but you've got to be gritty and find a way and win, and that's exactly what this team did.

Q. Caitlin, tonight was one of the best crowds that I've seen since I've been covering games. What would you say about the support that they've given you over your last four years now that you just completed your last game here?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think I could probably talk about them for a really long time. I think more than anything it's just like thank you. I'm very grateful that I got to play in an environment that supports women's athletics the way that they do, not only women's basketball -- and to be honest, they've been doing this before I ever stepped on campus. Maybe it wasn't quite at the magnitude it is now, but these people and these fans have showed up, and they'll continue to show up.

They understand how good our sport is. They understand how good the sport is going. But they've shared in a lot of really special memories for myself in a journey that I've changed a lot as a person and as a basketball player over the course of my last four years, and they've been a big part of that too.

I think the biggest thing is just thank you. I'm forever grateful. I hope there's a lot of times that I can come back and be in the crowd at sold-out Carver-Hawkeye Arena and cheering for young girls that want to be like us.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Caitlin and Hannah.

Q. Lisa, you knew West Virginia was physical. You knew they were very good defensively. If someone had told you before the game you'd be held 30 under

your average, Caitlin would have one field goal in the last 16 minutes, and you guys would have one field goal in the fourth quarter, how would you have liked your chances?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, probably not very good. That's typically not our style, but we found a way, and I'm so proud of this team for being able to divert from what usually works for us and find a different way to win.

Again, I thought against that pressure defense that we only turned the ball over 15 times, that is the lowest of any West Virginia opponent all year. So I am extremely proud of our women for keeping their composure in that situation. And it certainly helped playing with a terrific home crowd.

Q. Staying on the note of defense, you all were held to your lowest first half total of the season at 26. So what was going on in the first half, and what went right in the second?

LISA BLUDER: The second half we got to the free-throw line early in both quarters. That was our best offense, was drawing fouls and getting to the free-throw line. We're a good free-throw shooting team, and by far, getting to the free-throw line was the easiest way for us to score.

With that kind of pressure defense, you're going to foul a lot, and I'm glad we had a crew that called it tonight. I mean, there was 57 free throws shot in the Princeton game. So this is not unusual for that to happen.

Q. You kind of go back to last year and you had a very similar game against Georgia here in the round of 32. You heard Caitlin talk about how this one wasn't as close but they used that. Did you see that in your team's huddle this year where they were a little more composed than they might have been last year, and did they use last year's experience to help them in a close game this year?

LISA BLUDER: We didn't talk about it specifically, but I think it was in everyone's mind that we were able to pull that out last year. I think that gave us confidence. When you're in situations and you can use that experience to fall back on, we're going to use that wherever we can. I think that helped us tonight.

Q. Coach, you talked about West Virginia's defense but also your lack of turnovers. I'm curious, when you got in that half-court, when you were trying to run your offense, what was most challenging against that West Virginia defense once you kind of got through the initial traps?

LISA BLUDER: I don't want to give anybody a scouting report, so I'm just going to keep that to myself right now. You can watch the film and know what bothered us there. I mean, obviously, right? You saw the good defense that they performed. I'm going to leave it at that.

Q. Not many coaches coach generational players, and fewer still sort of do it in a time of like right now when the sport is growing as it is and more eyes are on it. I'm just curious what this last year coaching Caitlin, like, how has it changed you as a person and as a coach?

LISA BLUDER: I just think I appreciate her so much, her skills. I'm very appreciative -- I appreciate how she has handled this. Her crown is heavy. She has been the face of women's basketball -- and you could even say men's basketball -- all year long.

For her to do that every single night and really never have a bad night, to do that with seeing the best defense that she can get every single night, everybody doing different things to her, pulling off being a great teammate, not having people be jealous of her on this team, filming a commercial one day, being in practice fully ready to go the next day, that has impressed me.

I guess I'm just more appreciative of what these young ladies are going through today as far as social media and the haters out there. I think I just appreciate them and feel they have a really -- it's a great time to be a female athlete, and it's also a really hard time. It's both. It really is.

Q. We've talked a lot about West Virginia's defense tonight, but you mentioned you guys' defense holding them to 54. What did you feel you did well tonight, and what adjustments did you make throughout the game to counter against them?

LISA BLUDER: We tried to mix up our defenses a little bit, but I felt our players were really locked in and knew the scouting report really well, knew their personnel very well. Gabbie Marshall doesn't have a point tonight. She worked her tail off on defense. And that's worth a lot. And she has another block tonight. That's pretty cool.

No, I think our defense was very good, and I think it's because they were so focused on it, and they knew against a really good defensive team like that, they were going to have to match the defensive intensity.

Q. Just to follow up on that last question for a minute, you limited Quinerly to only 15 points tonight, and I think Harrison only maybe 6. Can you talk a little bit about what you were doing to limit those two very

dynamic guards?

LISA BLUDER: That was our focus coming into there. We held Jordan to 3 points, and that's really hard to do. She's so fast going downhill, and JJ was -- she's an incredible player, but again our defensive focus was on those two players. We knew we were going to give up some open shots to other people, but we really felt other people are going to have to beat us. We're not going to let those two beat us. Other people are going to have to do that.

There were some people who stepped up and made some shots. Kyah Watson, she played a really good game tonight, one of her best, I think. Jayla Hemingway came in and played a really nice game too.

Again, you take the ball out of the hands of those two players, it's different.

Q. I'm curious to know about your thoughts on Syd's performance tonight, 13 points, 7 rebounds, goes 5 for 5 from the line, not to mention she started. What does that say about her in terms of where she was, where she is, and where she's going?

LISA BLUDER: I'm so glad that you asked about Syd because, honestly, we were tied up with two minutes, right? Her drive, left-hand layup, fouled, three-point play, that was a huge momentum for us. So I'm really proud of Syd.

Her ball handling has improved so much, her confidence has improved so much. Rebounding-wise, she ends up with 7. We had a lot of good rebounding performances, Kate has 10, Hannah has 11.

But Syd having to slip into a starting position at this time of the year is a really difficult thing to do. I mean, that could upset the tempo of a lot of teams. But I think our team has always respected Syd so much and what she brought to the table, I'm proud of the rest of the group for not hanging our heads that we don't have Molly, but instead it's, okay, now we get Syd in the starting lineup. It's just mentally a positive way to think about it.

Q. Along the same thing, Hannah Stuelke, 11 total rebounds, 5 on one end, 6 on the other end. Just curious your thoughts on her play tonight in the paint. And then also had, what, 12 points as well.

LISA BLUDER: She rebounded the ball really well for us, and we needed that. We needed her speed on the defensive end, I think. I think she could have been a little more on attack mode on offense tonight. I think she passed the ball out too easily. I think she could have went

to work a little bit more on the offensive end.

And I want her to do that because she's really explosive and she's really good. And she didn't show that part of her game tonight, but she helped us so much on the defensive end, the rebounding end and just being able to transition like she does.

We didn't get that many transition offensive points, but her being able to transition back on defense was also really important for us.

I see Krysty there. I just want to shout out to my Krysty there. Love you. Our kid captain from the very first game, Krysty has been with us on this journey. I'm so proud of her. Thank you, Krysty, for being there with us this whole time.

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