

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Oregon State vs Notre Dame

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Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Coach Niele Ivey

Maddy Westbeld

Sonia Citron

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

Q. You guys have a fairly short roster this year. Can you just talk about how you've been dealing with rest and getting ready to play all these games in a row? I know you kind of had a short roster last time this team won a championship, so I assume it's something you're used to?

NIELE IVEY: Yes, unfortunately. I credit my performance team. They've done a tremendous job of our recovery. We're very intentional with everything we're doing this season. As our numbers have decreased, we've just been trying to be smart about practice times, recovery times.

And unfortunately, like I mentioned, we've been in this situation before, myself as an assistant and then last year losing two starters. It just requires everybody to do a little bit more and just try to be smart about the way that we approach games, the things that we do in games, but also our recovery. I think it's the biggest piece of it.

I have a resilient group. To be honest, we're fighting four our lives every night, 40 minutes, the lower roster, but just our resilience has been incredible.

Q. I was hoping you could take us back to the very first time you saw Hannah, either on tape or in person, what your impressions were and how your projection of her has played out compared to where she is right now.

NIELE IVEY: Yes, well, definitely it was word of mouth. Obviously we have all the information, high school, AAU



connections, relationships. So her name was brought to our radars. So I went to see her in AAU basketball, and I was amazed. She was the smallest person on the court but the one that had the biggest heart, that she played with so much passion, so feisty.

She was just different. Every year I watched her more and more, and her confidence grew. The stage became a little bit bigger: Nike EYBL, USA Basketball. The stage got bigger, and I feel like that's when she shined the most.

She always separated herself, watching her. She just plays with a different level of passion that you don't see very often. Especially the new age of basketball, you just don't see it as much. I always felt like she was different on the floor.

What was your second question?

Q. What did you see in her at that time in terms of what her potential could be? And then the reality you've had this year, has it played out the way you thought, or has she exceeded expectations?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, so the potential that I thought, I was like, she's going to be really special in college because the way she plays defensively. You don't see a lot of players that love to play defense, and she loves to play defense. Her offense is most of the time dictated by her defense.

But the passion that she played with, I thought she's really going to change the game with that. I've been around it. Skylar Diggins, for us at Notre Dame, she changed our culture right from the time she stepped on campus because of the way she played defensively. That's what I thought she was going to do to the collegiate game.

Now coming to Notre Dame, I knew it was going to be a big assignment for her. I thought that she was going to take some time trying to implement the system. And she wasn't with us in the summertime because of USA Basketball, but we played in a foreign tour overseas.

So we had three games to play and practice, and that's when I saw -- I was like, she's ready. She's going to be



ready for the stage. And then South Carolina in Paris, that was the first test for me to see, okay, how is she going to perform on this stage, the bright lights.

She exceeded my expectations. This entire season she's improved every game. She has been a sponge. Very high IQ. Ultimate competitor. I knew she was going to be special. I knew that. I feel like she's definitely exceeded my expectations.

And I'm so proud of her because it's a hard task to come in, run a Power Five program. Credit to everyone around her. Credit to Liv, Maddy, all of our upperclassmen, they've done a great job of helping her. But, yeah, she's special.

Q. Niele, there's been a conversation this week coming out of these record-setting crowds from the first weekend about has women's basketball outgrown home sites for the first weekend, or do people like them and the advantages that are earned by the seedings. I'm curious where you stand on how the first weekend is set up and where the games are.

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, if you just look at the numbers, like you mentioned, I think it's all positive. There have been some upsets. It's really hard to get in this position, no matter if you're hosting or not. To get to the Sweet 16 is difficult. We fought to get our situation to host. We had to beat five ranked teams in a row, three games in a row in the ACC to achieve this, to achieve hosting.

I think when you put in the work throughout the season, that's a benefit, obviously, but you have to put in the work to be able to do that, and then again, I think there was a couple upsets.

I like it, but obviously I know that there's feelings either way, but for myself and our situation, we work really hard and we fought to be able to be in that position to host.

Again, what you want to bring is sold-out crowds. You want to bring the energy. You want to bring the fan base. I think that that was accomplished.

Q. I heard you just talk about Skylar Diggins-Smith and her defensive intensity and how you see a little bit of that in Hannah. If we look broadly in the women's game right now, because of records being broken and just exemplar performances, we're starting to see more women from even before the NCAA days be brought back into the conversation. Two-parter. One, is that something you actively do at Notre Dame, talk about other Notre Dame players throughout the years? And two, what do you see as the value added when women

of other generations are brought into the conversation as women's basketball is peaking?

NIELE IVEY: Yes, absolutely. We always honor our alum. I'm an alum. I've got three alums on my staff. My associate head coach recruited me. She's my recruiting coordinator. The way we recruit, the program that we are is all about honoring our alum and continuing the legacy that was laid before us.

So that's just what we do at Notre Dame. Luckily we've had so much tradition, so much excellence that have gone through this program, I think it's important to highlight those players, for those players to come back to mentor our players.

My team, they get me every day. They get to hear my voice every day. But I walked in their shoes. I was the first to win a National Championship. So the things I'm coaching in them, the things I'm saying to them, it actually happened for me. I went through two ACL injuries.

I like to bring back our alum, number one, to honor them, but also to help our players and mentor them and help them navigate the time -- explain their experiences, share those experiences and help them because it helped me as a player.

I think that's really important. That's something that I really -- I love to do within this program and this system, and I think it's been very beneficial.

My players have great relationships with our former players. And like you said, Skylar Diggins-Smith, she's a legend in our game, she's a legend in our school. So to have access to her is huge for our players, especially our point guards. Olivia has an amazing relationship with Skylar, and now Hannah.

And they all come back. I had Devereaux Peters that was in practice yesterday just to send us off, and she's a two-time WNBA champion. All those things matter because those are the women that my players are looking up to, and they just have that access, which I think is incredible.

Q. Thinking more broadly about how we're seeing names like Pearl Moore or Lynette Woodard be mentioned in women's basketball --

NIELE IVEY: I think that's important because a lot of this young generation, they don't remember. They don't even understand what the pioneers that paved the way for them, Cheryl Miller, Sheryl Swoopes, all those players, sometimes I think they get lost, and they were the ones

that paved the way for us.

And I think it's amazing that they're getting their flowers now and their names are being reintroduced because we wouldn't be where we are in women's basketball in its entirety if it wasn't for those women that paved the way for us.

And I think it's really important to continue saying their name and continue honoring them because it just gives substance to what's happening because what's happening in women's basketball is very special, and you love to honor the ones that helped this game grow.

Right now we're all trying to continue to grow this game, and it's the momentum that's happening for women's basketball is at an all-time high, and what other better way to do than to go back and honor the legends that created this space for us.

Q. When you think about growing the game and finding new fans and putting new stars in front of those potential fans, how important are those games that are on ABC, FOX, NBC, the main stations? How important is it to keep having those games throughout the course of the season and not just in February and March?

NIELE IVEY: Oh, right. It's really important, especially right now. The talent, there's so many generational talents, there's so many rising stars and just stars in this game.

We're playing at an elite level, all these players, programs, coaches. It's really high level. So having the opportunity to showcase our talent on these major networks is really important, like you mentioned, not just in February and March and one-offs, Big Mondays, it needs to be all the time because the game in itself is so elite right now, and we have a lot of support. And so I think just having all those networks can continue viewership and can help our game grow because of it.

Q. You've answered a lot of questions about the lack of depth and the short rotation and the injuries, but you've kind of dealt with that for most of the season. I'm wondering how ACC play and ACC Tournament has kind of prepared you to deal with this on the biggest stage now.

NIELE IVEY: Yes, it's totally prepared me for it. Every game is an adjustment for me. I have to pivot every game, every situation, foul trouble, lack of players. We've been in a lot of situations. ACC has really prepared me.

Having three games in a row with a short bench, we know

exactly what we need to do. The players know exactly what they need to do. I have players that have a very disciplined recovery session, and they know exactly for them what they need to do. There's some times that I just do walk-throughs. There's some times that I have multiple players that are on the bike not practicing.

So we've done this all season long. So they know exactly what to expect. They know exactly how to take care of their bodies after games.

Like I said earlier, I credit my performance team, my trainer, my nutritionist and our strength coach. They've done a phenomenal job of being very intentional, individualized with everyone, every single player on our team, knowing exactly what they need, how much recovery they need.

Our practices are not long. They're very purposeful. It's worked for us. But ACC has really prepared us.

Q. Tell us about what you worry most about in terms of Oregon State and this game.

NIELE IVEY: Well, first of all, just an incredible team. They have a lot of balance, a lot of depth, a lot of height. They're averaging seven, almost eight threes a game. Great size. Their two best players are their post players, at Timea Gardiner being the Sixth Woman of the Year in the Pac-12. Just amazing.

I think for us it's just managing their physicality, their size, but also their ability to shoot from the three-point line. We're going to be very strategic tomorrow trying to attack the things that they have defensively but also finding ways to contain their posts and rebounds.

It's going to be a really tough task, but I'm excited. Scott does a great job at Oregon State. We played them two years ago. I'm very familiar with their system, their program, playing them even when I was an assistant coach. I think it's going to be a great game, and obviously we're fortunate to be here, and I'm super excited to get to work tomorrow.

Q. I was hoping both of you could kind of address the dynamic you have in having a freshman as a point guard, and as upperclassmen how you handle helping her out, being leaders yourself, but then taking leadership from a freshman, how that works.

MADDY WESTBELD: I think she's the floor general when she steps on the court. We listen to what she says at all times during the game. She's incredible because she leads us on the defensive end, too.



Honestly, I think it's a good kind of dynamic, like you said, of leading her while also respecting and having that relationship where we both really respect what we've got to say, and at the end of the day, it's just business.

Just knowing that she's leading us to a correct place and we're also doing the same thing for her.

SONIA CITRON: Yeah, I think it's important that there is respect both ways in that we don't really see her as a freshman. She's just our point guard. I mean, especially when someone is as talented as Hannah is, it's not really something where we have to be constantly on her because she's young and inexperienced or anything like that.

Like, she's come in and has done everything that she's needed to. And, yeah, it's just something where we don't really see grade. She's our point guard, we're going to lead her, she's going to lead us, and it just goes both ways.

Q. For both players, this is your third Sweet 16. There's three ACC teams here on this stage. Kind of curious, dealing with the lack of depth and the short bench you've had all season, how do you think dealing with that in the ACC play and the ACC Tournament has helped you prepare to deal with it now considering you won both your first- and second-round games by double digits?

MADDY WESTBELD: I think that also plays into that like respect and that chemistry level that we have on the court. Hannah is a freshman, KK is a sophomore, but they're seniors in experience. We've been here before. I think the lack of depth carries great chemistry and trust that we have with each other on the court.

So, yeah, we've been through a lot, but I think it's really well-prepared us for where we're at right now and where we're going to go.

SONIA CITRON: I think she said everything. We've been in this position before. We're used to it. We know how to handle it.

Q. Coach just talked about the Notre Dame legacy, how players drop by, alums. What does it mean to you guys to have such a robust alumni group that comes back, is supportive, and has you guys learn about the history of Notre Dame if you didn't know about it basketball-wise?

SONIA CITRON: It's amazing just to see how much alumni comes back, and they're always hyping us up, always talking to us, and it just shows how close and tight-knit the

Notre Dame network is.

Then it's just cool to see because we know how good of a program Notre Dame is, but when you really see those alumni, you just see how special it is.

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I think growing up and watching it from the stands, watching my sister play and just seeing the standard even as a little girl, what this place means, it's really, really special.

Then obviously to have alums and stars come back, we have their numbers in our phones. They text us after games. They really let us know when we need to do something. It's really like our big sisters, figuratively or not.

I think it's just a credit to, like Coach said, the legacy of this program and what it means.

Q. You guys this season going to this matchup against Oregon State, looking at the numbers and strength of schedule, it seems pretty even. Is there a particular team that this Oregon State squad, looking at the scouting report, that they remind you of that you've played this season? Or are they entirely different and maybe a team unlike anyone you've faced this season?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, they're a really intelligent team. I think with such a strong post presence, we definitely have seen teams like that with NC State, with Virginia Tech, with South Carolina. Just a team where they rely on post presence. They rely on inside-out game, and they have great shooters, and they're really smart.

Yeah, I think we're well-equipped for what we're about to see tomorrow.

Q. Maddy just mentioned that Oregon State is a little bit like NC State and Virginia Tech. How do you think the quality of the ACC sort of helped you prepare for an opponent like that?

SONIA CITRON: I mean, the ACC is an amazing league. I think every single game you really have to play your best; otherwise, you can lose on any given day.

I think just playing teams like Virginia Tech, like NC State, we're just used to playing that caliber of a team. We're definitely ready for it.

Q. You both mentioned Hannah's defense being a key as well as her offense, but can you talk about the overall team defense and how much pride you guys take in it, and what kind of communication it takes to

play the kind of defense you have against some of these games?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I think we do a really good job of holding each other accountable. I think it takes pride. We've said that all season. It takes individual pride to lock your defender up.

I think Hannah leads us in that regard. She leads us for 94 feet in that regard. She brings that fire. I think me and Sonia are like kind of quieter players. We're a little bit more calm, and she brings the fire out in us. And I think it's an amazing addition to this team. I think it's what we needed in the past.

Like I said, it's just individual pride that we've really been able to hold each other accountable on.

Q. Maddy, to follow up on your comment about sitting in the stands and watching your sister play, what was the first game you remember going to for Notre Dame, and is there anything that stands out that made you want to be here?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I remember a lot. I remember sneaking away after the games to go shoot in the back gym.

I also remember I think one of my favorite games to watch Notre Dame was the Tennessee game that they played their National Championship year. I remember they lost to Louisville, like just got blown out by Louisville, and then the next game they were down by close to 20 against Tennessee and they came back and won.

I think after that, it was like this is a team that shows so much grit, and I think everybody at that point knew this was such a special year for them. Just watching that in the stands and watching how calm my sister was throughout that whole process, it was just like, this is an incredible place.

Q. I've heard y'all talk a little bit this season about Olivia kind of running scout team point guard for you all a little bit. Throughout the season, how important has she been behind the scenes in helping you all prepare for this moment?

SONIA CITRON: Yeah, incredibly important. I think she's done so, so much for us. Like you said, whether she's on scout team helping us prepare, because obviously if we can defend her we can defend anyone in the country, or just honestly talking to us during the games just because she sees it from a different perspective being on the bench. But she's done so, so much for us off the court.

Q. You've played some of the top teams in the country and some of the top players in the country, whether it's Paige or Liz Kitley or whoever. I was wondering for both of you playing with Hannah, obviously, who are the top women's players that you would pay to go watch and see in college basketball this year?

MADDY WESTBELD: Hannah Hidalgo. I think she's runner-up in every single thing that you can see. Every time I go on Instagram, she broke another record, and it's something that you don't see every day.

She's special. She's different. If I wasn't her teammate, I'm blessed that I am, but if I wasn't, I would pay to go watch her play.

SONIA CITRON: I would have to say Hannah, too, because you don't see a lot of people do what she does on the offensive end and the defensive end and the way she just picks up people and terrorizes them, I would pay to see that, too.

Q. Who would you pay to see maybe 10 or 15 or 20 years ago when you were growing up and got into watching college basketball or the pros?

MADDY WESTBELD: For me, Skylar Diggins was everything to me as a kid. She was the best basketball player in the world to me. I was always watching her on TV growing up. If I could have paid to go watch her play, I absolutely would have done that.

SONIA CITRON: I have a couple people in my mind, but I would have loved to see Coach Ivey play just because I haven't really seen her play, but I would have loved to see what kind of point guard she was.

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