

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs Iowa

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Caitlin Clark

Kate Martin

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the Iowa Hawkeyes.

COACH BLUDER: We are obviously extremely excited to be here. This is everybody's goal, right, at the beginning of the year, to be in the Final Four and have the opportunity to play for a national championship.

When we were here last year, nobody thought we'd be here again this year. And we didn't listen to anybody. We just listened to the people in our locker room and our family and our circle, and here we are again. So I'm proud of the women and how they kept believing no matter what.

Obviously we have one of the best players in the country on our team, and we're thrilled to have that. But I do not want this to be a game that's promoted as Caitlin versus Paige. And I know it already has been. But I don't want that. I want it to be Iowa versus UConn and let these two women do what they do best.

Q. Caitlin, what did you learn last year when you were in this Final Four that you can apply to this year, on and off the court?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think being here last year, you're not really prepared for everything that goes on outside of the game. There's so many distractions. There's so many events you have to attend. There's so many obligations that you have to do.

And your main focus is to come here, and you're playing in the biggest basketball games of your career. So I think being able to block all that out and really lock in and focus on what your job is and what you're here for, and knowing

we're not satisfied.

So I think that's the biggest thing is soak all that in and enjoy it. But at the same time, this is business. You know, we're here to win a basketball game and hopefully win two.

Q. Caitlin, kind of piggyback off what Lisa said, so much of the attention has been on you specifically this year. And you mentioned this over the weekend. When you're gone, what do you want to see and what do you think needs to happen to continue the momentum that women's basketball has seen over the last couple of years?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think the parity in our game has certainly helped over the course of the last, you know, whatever, five years. I think there's always been the blue bloods that have always been very good, but over the past Final Fours you've seen maybe teams that haven't been there in 25, 30 years. I think that's really good for our game. It attracts new fans. It showcases new players. It showcases new coaches.

And I think also the amount of stars we have in our game, especially the young stars we have in our game, I think this freshman class really put on a show this year. They had me watching. They had everybody around the country watching.

And I think the beauty is most of them are going to have to stay and play for four years, and they're just going to get better and better. Their teams are going to get better and better. And that will also additionally help the parity in our game and attract more people to want to watch. So I think those two things are the most exciting part about the future of women's college basketball.

Q. Caitlin, to your point about there's all this other stuff going on here, there's a USA Basketball mini camp that you were invited to, but you're busy so you can't go. Have you talked with anyone from USA Basketball about how you might navigate that going forward? Have you seen -- all the players are walking around here. Has anyone come up and talked to you -- hey, we're ready for you to join whenever you're

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ready?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, first of all, I've been lucky enough to play for USA Basketball three times on their Junior National Team. I know how the system works.

And Coach Bluder has coached for them three times. And anytime you're invited to do anything for USA Basketball it's a tremendous honor. For me it was a win-win, either doing that or this. And obviously this was where my focus was. I wanted to get back to the Final Four with this group.

And honestly I haven't talked to anybody. I have people that do that for me. And I think growing up, like, your dream is always to be on the national team and play for the national team. And a lot of those players that are, you know, in that pool or selection of who's going to be on the Olympic team are my idols. Those are people I grew up watching and wanting to be like.

So I think it's more than anything it's just a tremendous honor to be invited and be on the same list as a lot of those great players.

Q. Caitlin, you just talked about how to continue the momentum that women's basketball has right now. You guys are in it. So it's probably hard to recognize. How would you describe the moment that the sport is having right now?

KATE MARTIN: I mean, it's just super cool to be a part of. We're not taking anything for granted when it comes to that. I think it's hard when you're in the moment, like you said, to really recognize and realize what is happening, but, I mean, it shows with our viewership versus LSU, 12.3 million viewers. That's something super cool.

And that just attracts more fans and that's a good brand of basketball. LSU's a great team. So are we.

So it's fun whenever we can be a part of this, and obviously having stars like Caitlin and other stars across the country, that attracts more and more people. And it's fun to be in the position that we are and be role models and people that others can look up to.

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is there's been so many amazing players that have come before us and laid a really solid foundation of what our game has become over, maybe the viewership numbers over the course of the last two years.

But I think as a competitor and being involved in this moment, it's hard for you to wrap your head around. When you step on the court and you're playing for 40 minutes

you're not thinking, oh, my gosh, there's 12 million-plus people watching this game at home. That's not going through your mind.

And obviously once you see those numbers, you see those numbers up against, like, it was only beat out by one regular season college football game. We beat out every NBA game other than the Game 5 of the Finals, I think that really puts into perspective what exactly where women's basketball is going and the type of excitement around our game.

But I think as a competitor and somebody that's so focused on what this team needs to do and playing two games a weekend, it's hard for you to wrap your head around.

Q. Tactically speaking, Coach Bluder, you were discussing how it's Iowa against UConn. And if it were a chess match, what would be the chess -- the checkmate X factor for success for your team.

KATE MARTIN: I mean, we obviously know that there are a very good team. They're very disciplined in all aspects and they're obviously very well coached. We know they have Paige on their team. We're not going to score, keep her to zero points.

But I think we're going to change up, different defenses, throw some different things at them, keep them on their toes.

But really at this point in the season it's really more about us than who we're going against. We're going to continue to focus on things that we focused on all year and play Iowa basketball. I think that's the main thing is executing what we need to do.

CAITLIN CLARK: I would say the same. I think -- I don't think there's just like one thing that's like you do this, you win the game. I think it's you have to play a complete basketball game. I think that's what we've been able to do over the course of the last two games, whether it was Colorado or LSU.

We were really good on defense. We started off a little in zone versus LSU and played man-to-man the rest of the game and really battled. I think we're going to have to play a great half-court defense, gonna need to run in transition, need going to execute our offense in the half court. I think it's all those things.

And like Kate said at this point you scout and watch film, but at the same time you've got to have a lot of focus on yourself too and executing what you do. I think that's where a lot of our focus lies.

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Q. Talk about the impact that Coach Bluder has had on your careers, both on and off the court?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think, I could sit up here and talk all day about Coach Bluder. I think the biggest thing for myself is she believed we would be here and be in this moment. That was the greatest thing for me going throughout the recruiting process, is I wanted to play for a coach that had the same vision that I did.

And we were probably about the only two people that believed we would be at a Final Four. And now we're at back-to-back Final Fours.

And in addition I think she's one of the best leaders I've been around. She values every person in her program from top to bottom whether you're a student trainer. Whether you're the associate head coach you're going to get her same attention, and she's going to value you just the same because everybody's role's important.

And that goes for every single player on our team, too. Like, we all have an equal voice. We all are valued the same inside our locker room. I think that speaks for our culture. But also, like, people can tell when they're watching how excited our bench is, how excited our players are on the court. And that starts with your head coach. And I'm just lucky to be coached by her.

KATE MARTIN: I want to echo everything Caitlin said. But also, something that's super special about Coach Bluder is she cares about us as people first over basketball players. And she'd be one of the first people I would go to her office and go with a problem. Or if I needed advice for anything, she'll be the first person to give me great advice and be a shoulder to lean on.

So I appreciate that about her. But I mean, I've always wanted to play for Coach Bluder ever since I was really young. It's been a dream come true because she's the best, and I'm very grateful that I've had the opportunity to play for her for six years.

Q. Caitlin, you played against Paige and UConn, if my memory is right, in 2021 in the tournament. It was very different circumstances in a whole lot of ways, off the court, with the pandemic and everything. But what are your memories of playing against her? And how different do you think this moment's going to be? I know your coach doesn't want it to be about Paige against Caitlin, but this moment is so big, what do you think it's going to be like?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, that game is super blurry. It

feels like forever ago. I was looking back and I saw some old footage of that game and we both look really, really young. It's cool to see how our careers have evolved, and a lot of different players on both teams.

But I don't know, like Coach said, it's not Paige versus Caitlin, and it takes the entire team to win a basketball game. Both of us are going to do everything we can.

But I think the coolest thing about Paige is how resilient she is. Obviously she's been kind of dealt a tough hand and only has positive things to say about her teammates. And the way she carries herself on and off the court and the way she works hard, none of that has changed.

Since I've known her since she was in middle school she's always worked that same way, always had that fire and been a leader.

I really honestly couldn't be happier for her for the year she's had and the way she's led this team back to the Final Four when they've dealt a tough hand as a program. And they never made excuses. To me, I think that's something, you know, you just really admire as a competitor more than anything. So I think it's really cool.

Q. Caitlin, why do you wear No. 22? Is there inspiration behind it?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, I'm not a very creative person. I was born on January 22nd. It's what I went with when I was about 5 years old.

Q. Caitlin, since we're in Cleveland, and this is where your college career will end, it's also where LeBron's NBA career began. Have you had any interactions with him over the years? And do you plan to play until you're 40 and score 40,000 points?

CAITLIN CLARK: That wouldn't be too bad. I wouldn't say no to that. Honestly, I've never talked to LeBron directly. But obviously I've seen he's commented about myself. And I just saw this morning he talked about women's basketball in general and how good the game is and the stars in our game.

He knows what he's talking about. He pays attention. He supports the game. He doesn't just talk about it. Like, he really shows up and supports. I think that's the coolest thing; one of the greatest players of all time really helping support and grow women's basketball. Like, that's exactly what we need.

He's somebody I've always idolized. It's cool to be in Cleveland and play here, a place where his career started,



and he was able to do so many amazing things.

Q. Obviously you don't need anybody's validation outside of your locker room for what you ladies have been able to accomplish. But piggybacking off what Tom said about LeBron. You have Luka. You've had celebrities coming out of the woodwork kind of parachuting in watching your game. Does it feel differently when you have so many people talking about your sport that you live every single day, and now everybody, including our talk shows and around the country, physically and verbally talking about your sport on a daily basis over the last month?

KATE MARTIN: You go.

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it's really special. I think it's cool. This is exactly what we wanted for women's basketball, but also I feel like it could have been a thing a long time ago. There's been so many amazing stars in our game. There's been so many amazing people to support our game.

It's not surprising that everybody's wanting to talk about it right now. But the product has always been there. Maybe it's on an increased level.

And I think that goes back to my first point, is the parity in our game, the stars in our game, the young talent in our game, people are just attracted to that. They love watching it. They love watching the competitive fire.

They love seeing more upsets in the women's tournament. All of that is just attracting more and more people. It doesn't get old seeing so many people talk about women's basketball. For me, that's the greatest thing. I know it will only continue to grow more.

Q. Caitlin, I know the job's not finished. You've done some amazing things, obviously on and off the court. What are you proud of most?

CAITLIN CLARK: Oh, gosh, that's a loaded question. I don't know. I mean, I think I'm most proud of just the way my career's evolved over the course of the last four years. I think coming in here and, I don't know, there wasn't -- people didn't ever think we would get to the Final Four. Now to be here back-to-back times is amazing.

But at the end of the day people aren't going to remember how many points I scored. People aren't going to remember -- people may remember we were in the Final Four twice -- but people aren't going to remember like my buzzer-beating shots versus whoever.

That's not going to matter to people in the end. I hope they

remember how we made them feel, how we brought joy to their lives, how we gave their families something to scream about on the TV on the weekends. I hope those are the biggest things people remember.

I hope all the young boys and girls remember the joy that we played with and how we took 10 seconds of our time to sign their autograph and that inspired them to be whatever they want to be.

I think that goes for, I think I'm speaking for our entire team, and that's what we're the most proud of, the way we've carried ourselves through this entire process. I think that's additionally allowed us to have so much success on the court, just the team and the family we've built over the past four years.

And that speaks to the way Coach Bluder has built this program. There's been a lot of good Iowa women's basketball players to come before us and give us a foundation to maybe take another step forward and take the program to a place it hasn't been since the '90s.

For me, that's the coolest thing. I've had so many amazing life opportunities and created so many memories with some of my best friends, and those are the things that will last forever.

Q. What I asked Caitlin about what she wants to see the game, the continued growth after she leaves. What do you want to see? Do you have fears that -- you guys have 12.3 million the other night -- do you worry if those numbers go down that people will look at that negatively or make a negative judgment about that next year?

COACH BLUDER: I mean, excuse me, my voice is gone. I don't know why. I woke up this way. I apologize.

I mean, I don't know if we can sustain the numbers we had last Monday night for a whole season. We're at the climax right now. We're at the end of the season. Everybody's watching us right now. I think that's pretty special.

But I do not think that our game is going to go down. I think there's too much great young talent. I think there's unbelievable coaches at this level. And I think the world has caught on to what they've been missing.

I think our game has been really for a long time and I think people have just missed the boat on it. Now we've finally had the exposure and people have understood, wow, I haven't watched women's basketball for a long time, I've missed something. And I don't think they're going to want to miss anymore.



Q. QUESTION; I wondered, are you and Jan going to wear matching outfits again? It was a winning strategy last year?

COACH BLUDER: We better check. I don't know. I don't know what she's got planned.

Q. QUESTION; what I really wanted to know is Caitlin's point about playing with a lot of joy. It occurs to me, watching the entire women's tournament this year, that is a word that you can associate with a lot of players. And I wondered, do you think that any of that joy is them being excited that finally so many people are paying attention to this game and people are seeing their talent and their passion and it's just all coming out? It seems, not to take anything away from the men, different from the men's game?

COACH BLUDER: I don't know if it's now that they realize that people are paying attention because, honestly, when you're playing the game you don't know that; you are just in the moment.

A lot of people wrote to me after last year and said, man, your team played with such joy. They gave us joy. They gave us hope, getting through a tough situation. I got hundreds, hundreds of emails and text messages about that.

So I do think it's something our team has always played with and maybe people are just noticing it now.

I've always wanted our team to play like that. Like, this is a game. Let's have fun. Let's play for each other. And, so, I don't know if it's now because of the media. I feel like we've always played that way.

Q. With the sold-out crowds you have everywhere, I'm curious as a coach, you talk losing your voice, how do you get play calls to your team knowing there's 17,000 screaming fans? Is it hand signals? How do you make sure they run what you want them to run?

COACH BLUDER: I actually have a really good coach's voice just not today. I'm really very loud in calling those plays out. But I do have hand signals too. And through time, sometimes they kind of know what you want them to do at this point of the season. But I definitely use hand signals too.

Q. I asked Caitlin, what did you learn last year in Final Four as a coach -- okay, this worked, this didn't -- as far as all the outside stuff going on, to get your team ready to play tomorrow?

COACH BLUDER: I think that's one mistake I made between the two games last year that I've learned going into this year is there are so many other distractions. And you have to protect your emotional energy.

And it's really hard to do when all these people around you, whether it's parents or people asking you for tickets or this media obligation or that. You can be exhausted by the time the game tips. Especially when you're talking about tomorrow being a 9:30 tip. I mean, right? A lot of us are usually in bed by then. So it's really hard.

So I'm really cautioning them on that. I'm talking about it more. You've got to protect yourself. You've got to figure out ways to invest in your emotional energy, whatever it is for you.

But I'm not having the team be required to go to so many offsite activities as I did last year.

Q. You've been with Jan and Jenni for so long. What has it been like to experience the last two years kind of as a trio? And what does it do for you as a coaching staff to have that core and know each other so well?

COACH BLUDER: I think it's made it more special to share it with these guys just because we've been through so much together. One year my husband and I were celebrating our anniversary and Dave walks down the office hallway carrying a bunch of flowers. And Jenni yells out, hey, I've been with you 25 years, where are mine?

It's true, we're like a family. And it makes it so much easier to go through the bad times when you have people that you really care about. But it makes it that much more gratifying when you get to go have these good times together.

Q. I'm curious, as you mentioned you don't want this to be Paige versus Caitlin, but when you look at UConn, Nika does so much for them. When she stays out of foul trouble it seems that it helps Paige so much. When you watch them, how do you see how much she can dictate what they do?

COACH BLUDER: She's such a great point guard and she plays so hard defensively, and I think she'll be guarding Caitlin. She uses her size. She's such a smart basketball player. It does kind of relieve Paige of some of those duties, in my estimation.

But it's like she doesn't really have to force things or create things. She kind of is doing what is there and available for her.

I think Gabbie Marshall does that for us, plays extremely hard defensively. Doesn't have to make points to be validated, but we'll take them if they're there.

Q. This UConn team likes to play up-tempo. Iowa likes to play up-tempo. How will you look to control the pace of play?

COACH BLUDER: I think both teams feel like they're ready to go. I mean, at this point in the year, we both played a certain pace, a certain style all year long. And I don't think now is the time to really adjust what you do. You just go out and do what you do.

And so we like to play fast, and we'll try to do that again tomorrow night.

Q. You've spoken recently about how Caitlin has really complimented her teammates and you really think it helps boost their confidence. Have you seen more of that from her this run compared to last year and how did the teammates react this year versus last year?

COACH BLUDER: I think she's learned that, through her Iowa journey, on how to be a great leader and a great leader builds up people around them.

I don't think she knew how to do that when she first came to Iowa because maybe, you know, she wasn't around as good of people. But then she learned, oh, these people are pretty good.

And so now she's learned how she can use her voice to give other people that ability to play freely. I think she's really learned that through her journey at Iowa.

Q. In the past, in women's basketball, we might not have seen the mass exodus of journalists that we saw when players walked out the door because the coaches were such the dominant figures. And a lot of them still are, obviously, but in this particular moment, the game is very player-centric in terms of the spotlight. I wonder what you make of that.

COACH BLUDER: I think that's the way it should be. I mean, they're the ones out there doing the hard work. They're the ones out there with the -- trying to be mentally focused and doing unbelievable things.

When I look at Caitlin and what she does, I mean, it's absolutely amazing, as we all know. Her shots. Her passing. Her ability to elevate at the highest level on the biggest stage, those are the people we should be paying attention to.

Q. You and Caitlin mentioned this moment that the game is having could have happened a while ago; the quality has always been there, maybe the exposure wasn't. Curious as somebody who has been in the game a long time, how have you seen the coverage of this game evolve and how important is that?

COACH BLUDER: Extremely important. I think we have had -- I think people should have been talking about women's basketball for a long time now. And they finally are. And maybe it just took some superstars like Paige and Angel and Caitlin in order for everybody else to understand how good our game was.

I think they should have been talking about it for a long time. So I think the media exposure has helped our game tremendously.

And I'm glad -- hey, I come from the Big Ten, and we were one of the first to have a national network. And I think that kicked everybody else off into doing it as well, all the other Power Five conferences. So I credit the Big Ten for kind of making that first initiation with the network right away.

Q. I'm just curious, we know how it is now. Like, what were we missing in the coverage before? What would this room have looked like, I don't know, 20 years ago?

COACH BLUDER: I wasn't here 20 years ago. So I'm not really sure. But obviously the media attention has grown. The viewership has grown, as it should have been. I don't really know how to answer that question because I wasn't here.

Q. I know you don't want it to be about Caitlin and Paige. I'm curious, in watching the tape on Paige, you saw her earlier in her career, where she is now and everything she's gone through to get to this point. Where do you feel like she's grown the most as a player, and then how do you try and defend that?

COACH BLUDER: You know, I've seen Paige play since high school. So, I mean, she's a Minnesota girl. I went up to her open gyms and such. So I know her. She doesn't know me but I know her, obviously, and her game.

What's always impressed me is her ability to stop on a dime and elevate with her shot, and she's already got such great size, but I would say, like Caitlin, she's grown in her team aspect. You know, just having really good players around them and relying on those other really great players and not having to do everything yourself.

Like, she had a good high school team, right, but now she's

got great players all around her. So she's been able to incorporate -- the last five games she's averaging almost five assists a game. So she's giving up the ball as well as her scoring has increased. I think just her ability to play alongside other people is what probably has changed the most.

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