

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Michigan vs Kansas

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Galen Center

Michigan Wolverines Kim Barnes Arico Media Conference

KIM BARNES ARICO: It's great to be here. Love coming to California. The weather is terrific. It snowed in Ann Arbor this morning, so we are really enjoying that. But just super excited about the opportunity for our team to be playing in the NCAA Tournament, to be playing at USC against a tremendous Kansas team, and excited to get on the floor again. It's been a few days since our last game, and I think our team is ready to go.

Q. This Kansas team is a lot like you guys were five years ago winning the WNIT and looking to establish themselves in the NCAA Tournament. What kind of similarities to you see between the two programs and what are you looking forward to most?

KIM BARNES ARICO: They are a great team and a lot of people have made that comparison, but I believe the year before last year, they were an NCAA Tournament team. So they are an experienced, experienced team. I mean, they have I think three fifth-year players, and two seniors along with a star freshman.

So just experienced. Have been there. Won the WNIT. Now have a chance to be back in the NCAA Tournament with that experience, and I think there is, you know, no substitute for that. You know, they have two first-team all-conference players, one most and one guard, that's always a great combination.

But the pieces around them, they are extremely, extremely balanced. I think when people watch our team, they probably feel similar. You know, Laila had a great Big Ten Tournament for us, and is an incredible player for us. But we have a balance attack around her as well.

Q. And you've mentioned all year that this team has been a work-in-progress and now that you've finally made the NCAA Tournament, how do you feel this



season has shaped up and what do you learn most about this team?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, just from my perspective, now I've been doing this a long time, you feel like it was my first year not that long ago but then it goes like that and you've been here for a long time.

But there were a lot of unknowns coming into the year, and a lot of inexperience with our program. You know, we had three graduate transfers, and all three have not been in the NCAA Tournament and they wanted an opportunity to come to Michigan to get a chance to go to the tournament, and then we had some incredible returners, you know, a senior in Cameron Williams, Laila who has obviously had an incredible year and Jordan Hobbs really took the next steps in her development. But just an entire program that was in a different position than it had been in years past.

So you know, I say to you guys after every game, you know, we're a work-in-progress, we're a work-in-progress.

I think the exciting thing for me as a coach is that we continue to improve, and that means, you know, we can compete on every single night, which I think we were able to see in the wig ten tournament, and I think our players are excited about that opportunity, as well. They don't want to be finished. There are a bunch of them, our freshmen and transfers that, have never been here. They were just dying for an opportunity to be in the Big Dance, what we call it, the Big Dance.

So you know, just proud, I guess I would say as a coach. Just proud that we continued. There are with times during the course of the year where we may have felt like we were not going to get a bid or we didn't know if we were going to get a bid and they continued to just fight and persevere and here we are today.

Q. Talking about your transfers, what would you say is most important for Elissa Brett coming into this game with her parents in town for this first March Madness game?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Elissa Brett is a special player for



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us. As we prepared for this tournament, and I watched, you know, I feel like every one of Kansas's games, I was wondering when they were watching ours, if they would be like, man, Elissa Brett, like I am every time I watch her.

I just think she's so special to our program, and you know, people from the outside might not see what she brings, and I remember the first time I had a chance to meet her parents, and they did come to the Bahamas, and in those couple of games in the Bahamas, she was outstanding. We actually beat Middle Tennessee program that upset Louisville today, so that was a tremendous win for our program.

And I don't remember exactly what the box score read, but there weren't big numbers for Elissa, and I said to her mom after the game, I said, "Do you understand how much of an impact your daughter had on our team today, even though her numbers on the box score weren't great."

And her mother is a basketball coach and her sisters are professionals in Australia. And she was like, "Uh-huh." I was like, yes, okay, they understand how she's impacted our program.

But you know, from my perspective, whether it's her or Lauren Hansen, both of those guys will be done this year. This is their fifth year. Their families have traveled to be a part of this, and to celebrate this opportunity for them to be on this stage.

So I'm going to tell Elissa, like I always do, just take a deep breath, both of them, just be confident. They are tremendous baseball players. They have had a great season. Just go out and be who they are, and we'll be fine.

Q. You mentioned you watched a lot of Kansas film. They were 10-10 at one point, got hot late. Anything you noticed in this last stretch that unlocked whatever their potential was?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. They played an extremely, extremely tough schedule and I think they were trying to figure it out a little bit. I could say the same about us. They played Connecticut and Virginia Tech early and it was a one-point game and an eight-point game. They were super competitive. They just didn't come out with the wins, and I think they were trying to have those returners gel with each other as, as well as a stud freshman come in and kind of figure out, you know, what her role is alongside a returning class.

They are a really good team and really experienced team. They might have been feeling like us a few years ago, a lot of pressure coming in and being in a different role than

they had traditionally been in. I think they were picked really high in their league to finishing. I think they probably felt -- you and I have talked about this, when Naz's group returns, holy cow, we are in a different position than we've ever been in.

So maybe just trying to figure out those nerves, and they got it figured out. They finished the year exceptionally strong and they are really playing well together and they can score in multiple places.

Q. Now that you really established this program as a competitive March Madness team, how do you think that's changed the recruiting process and the transfer portal getting those players to come to Michigan?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. You know, the whole landscape of college athletics, obviously, has changed the last few years with the addition of the transfer portal. But we always talk about at Michigan, we are a little bit different. You know, we don't really go in the portal as much because a number of reasons.

One, the University of Michigan is incredibly difficult and challenging from an academic perspective. So you have to be a great fit for Michigan, both from a basketball perspective as well as academically. So we are super selective in the portal.

But the other piece of that is we, as a program, pride ourselves on player development, and I think that's really important. I think our assistant coaches are just tremendous. I mean, we build a plan from the minute players step on campus, and then it's all about their growth, their growth as a person, and their growth as a basketball player through their time at Michigan.

So you know, we can go back, and I think of Emily Kaiser most recently who left recently and stayed for that fifth year and left as an All Conference player when she didn't play more than ten minutes a game until her senior season. I think that's something that's really important to us. When you talk about our recruiting, we feel very fortunate. We have a class of five that signed with us this year, and they are tremendous from top to bottom.

But two of them have been recognized as McDonald's All-Americans and our recruiting class has probably been the highest it's been in program history.

You know, next to Naz's class, which really left their mark on our program with going to two Sweet 16s and the Elite 8, we feel strongly that our returning class alongside this recruiting class that's coming in, we can do incredible things inside our program.



Q. Wanted to ask, I know historically, Michigan head coaches have been very supportive of each other as the seasons have progressed. Have any head coaches reached out to you before this run, and if so, who was it, what have they said and what kind of advice have you taken away?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, they actually, you know, we have a really, really tight-knit group. I tell our recruits this, as well. But you come to the University of Michigan to be surrounded by excellence. Excellence in everything: In the classroom, in the community, on the court, on the field. One of the things that drew me to the University of Michigan was to have an opportunity to work next to and alongside so many incredible coaches and really women's coaches. I love the men's coaches but I have a special place in my heart for women's coaches.

Through this run, Coach Harbough left. He's with the Chargers, but he did reach out for sure. He was one I thought maybe he would be at our game tomorrow, but I think there's Pro Day at Michigan so he's back at campus.

I'm really close with most of the women's coaches in the athletic department and we spend a lot of time together. We pick each other's brains. We call each other through bad times when we need to be lifted up and we call each other through great times.

Obviously our program was led by Carol Hutchins, I would say the entire athletic department, and she was one of the first people I met the day I was hired. I went to her softball academy and she welcomed me right away, and I happened to be neighbors with her and our relationship just grew from there. She's at most of our games. She's always messaging me after, but I can go on and on from our tennis coach to our soccer coach to our volleyball coach to our gymnastics coach, the lacrosse coach is amazing. My daughter actually is a senior in high school, and she will play for her next year; and it was between USC as I'm reading the sign where my niece coaches the lacrosse team and Michigan. I love them both, but I'll get to see more games now that she will be at Michigan.

So I just think the women's coaches are phenomenal, all the coaches are really, really phenomenal. But it's nice to have such a core group of people to share the real struggles of being in this spot and then the highlights of being in this spot as well.

Q. I've also been told that a handful of alumni will be back in the stands tomorrow supporting the team. What does that mean to have those women return and continue to support the program in the way that they

are?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, I'm beaming because it's going to be the first time in a minute that I've seen some of our former players.

California, there's so many Michigan alums in California. I think it's like the second-most represented state at the University of Michigan, in terms of students, maybe I'm wrong, I might have made that up but I think it's probably pretty close.

Anyway, we've had a bunch of players come from California and they are all back here. Danielle Williams stopped by the hotel last night. Shannon Smith I believe is out here. Sierra Thompson, you know, she played with Danielle Williams. Sierra Thompson was part of my first recruiting class at the University of Michigan, and I could go on and on.

But that class with Jillian Dunston who is now an assistant coach, they were part of my lowest of my lows when we didn't get selected for the NCAA Tournament to the highest of the highs: When they had the opportunity to cut down the nets in the triple overtime in the WNIT Championship and hang the first banner for women's basketball that's been hung in Chrysler Arena. We're probably -- you talk about the other great coaches we're probably the only sport at the university that did not have a banner up. So I'm going to get see a lot of that team tomorrow and they will be here cheering.

But they are Michigan Go Blue forever. We always say the Michigan family, and just what they have meant to me personally to our program and kind of like the legacy that they have left behind, will really, really be special, a special moment.

And I hope and I've been thinking about this all day, as well. I hope they have a chance to talk to our current team because they probably don't even -- they can't even imagine how much I speak about them and the impact that they have left, and how many times we look up at that banner just to congratulate them on kind of their legacy and what they left and what they meant to our program.

So I hope maybe they have a minute to talk to our team as well because that will be really cool.

Q. Jordan Hobbs was telling us about the skits that the players do before they go out for warmups, and I'm just curious your take on that, what your thought was when you saw it for the first time and what that is like from your perspective watching their acting skills?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, so I actually gave them that introduction. It's kind of been part of my coaching history for as long as I've been a coach.

So that would be something fun to talk to our former players about, as well. It's a tradition that has gone on for years and years and years and years, and it's different. I think each team, each year, takes on its own personality of how they are going to do it, and you know, sometimes it's one person.

Sometimes the person that does it, Halle Wangler who might be here tomorrow as well, she lives out in Cali, her dad went to the Rose Bowl and played football at Michigan.

So she had this feeling about Ohio State her whole life growing up. So she led the one with Ohio State and she just -- I think she gave the whole speech. She did something different. Sometimes they do around Christmas, it's like Santa Claus comes out and we do Christmas carols. Each time it's different. Each season, it's a little bit different, and it takes on the personality of our group.

This year, there's been a lot of singing and acting and yeah, The Bachelor, Santa Claus, Family Feud. Depends on what's going on in the world, too. We get a little bit of that. It's just something, I think it just gets our team to get in game day mode, to get in focus, but then also, to sometimes lighten the mood and just remember, it's a basketball game. We're supposed to be having fun. There's no pressure. It's just, you know, go out there and do the best you can. We've practiced these things each and every single day at a high, intense level. You are ready for this moment, and let's just enjoy it and try to embrace it.

So it cuts the ice a little bit. It makes it a little bit fun, and you get to see their personalities a little bit differently.

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