

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: LSU vs Iowa

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American Airlines Center

## Iowa Hawkeyes

## Lisa Bluder

### Finals Pregame Media Conference



plays with that joy, and that's how we practice too. We always want to lead the Big Ten in high fives, and that's not just during a game. That is during practice. That is during shootaround. We believe in that.

And we feel like this team brings a lot of joy to the people of Iowa. That is a real honor. To give people happiness that maybe are struggling with things. We go to the Children's Hospital a lot, and those kids over there, when they get to watch that game for two hours and they get to cheer for the Iowa Hawkeyes and be happy about a victory, that's almost as good as the win right there.

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Division I press conference. We're joined by the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Coach, we'll begin with that opening statement.

LISA BLUDER: I know a lot of people lost a lot of money in Vegas and elsewhere last night. Not a lot of people betting on the Hawkeyes.

So we're just going to keep believing. We have one more game to our season. Our team was just thrilled we get to spend two more days together. Honestly I think that's what they were most excited about. They're playing for a National Championship, and they get to spend two more days together.

This is such a tight group. People have asked me, how are you going to get them ready to play this game after last night? It really isn't hard. We've taken a business-like approach to this every single step of the way. Whether it's the Big Ten Tournament or during the season after a big win like Indiana and going into the Big Ten tournament, whether it was beating Colorado, beating -- it doesn't matter. Like we turn the next page. It's a veteran group, and they can handle it.

**Q. Caitlin is obviously playing great right now. What strikes me, is she seems to play with a lot of joy. She doesn't seem to get tight. She looks like she's having fun all the time. What is the value of that, especially when you're down and trailing? How does that rub off on the team and rub off on you?**

LISA BLUDER: She loves the game of basketball. It is where she wants to be. It's in a gym, and the bigger the spotlight, the more fun it is for her.

I think joy is contagious. I think our whole team actually

**Q. To real quick ones. A, how much sleep did you get last night? B, just the status of the damage and stuff. I know your home is close to kind of the epicenter of where everything happened. Everything safe there? And as well as with your players.**

LISA BLUDER: There was some really bad tornadoes that went through Iowa City in the Solon area, where I live. My favorite Mexican restaurant got its roof taken off. My house is fine, according to my neighbors. So we're happy about that. We're very blessed.

Again, a lot of people were without electricity last night, didn't get to see this great game, which is unfortunate. I didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night. My father-in-law used to always tell me, you sleep when you're dead. That's what we'll work on.

**Q. I'm not sure if you saw some comments last night from the South Carolina side, they seem to take offense to a narrative and words about the game against them being described as a bar fight. So I'm just wondering, A, if you saw the comments, and, B, if you had any reaction to that.**

LISA BLUDER: I did not see those comments. I mean, if you know me, I speak tongue in cheek a lot, and I was just saying an analogy of you've got to rebound like you're in a bar fight. That's all. It doesn't say who's fighting, right? But that's fine.

I've never been in a bar fight, by the way.

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(Laughter).

**Q. Could you think of a better script than an Iowa kid leading Iowa to potentially its first National Championship ever? And then to do it with the most eyeballs that have been on women's basketball in a long, long time. I mean, could you imagine this as a coach?**

LISA BLUDER: No, but this was her dream. It really was. It was her dream to take us to something that we haven't done in a long, long time and beyond that.

And when one kid dreams it, and everybody else is willing to jump on that train, it's amazing what can happen. It was -- that's why she wanted to stay in Iowa. She wanted to be close to home so her family could see her play. She also wanted to have the opportunity to do something.

And she knew that we could develop players. With Megan Gustafson being the National Player of the Year, coming off an Elite Eight appearance. Those were really in our favor in helping to get her as well.

**Q. Before yesterday's game, how much did it mean to you to get the sweater from Lark Birdsong that belonged to Dr. Grant?**

LISA BLUDER: There's a story behind that. Dr. Grant hired me, hired Lark Birdsong, our first women's coach, and she hired Angie Lee and she hired Vivian Stringer. Dr. Grant retired, and I had a strong relationship with Dr. Grant for all these years. She came to all of our games until she was too sick to do so.

Lark had a great relationship with Dr. Grant, as we all do, all of her coaches do. Lark cared for her quite a bit her last couple years of her life and helped her fulfill some wishes that she wanted, and one of the wishes of Dr. Grant was that she could see me, our team, in a Final Four.

The way they thought they could do that was by giving a piece of Dr. Grant, which was a sweater she wore. If you knew Dr. Grant, she wore these sweaters that were of Scottish wool quite a bit, V-necks, and she gave me a yellow one yesterday that Dr. Grant wore. I passed it around the circle yesterday, let everybody feel it, get a piece of Dr. Grant's DNA.

**Q. I know you grew up playing six-on-six, and watching Molly Bolin, who was at the game last night. What influence has that and the history of basketball in Iowa had on your coaching?**

LISA BLUDER: Machine Gun Molly was here? Didn't even know that. I watched her with the Iowa Cornets. Are you kidding?

Iowa basketball, I know some people can't understand it, six-on-six. I played it. Coach Jensen played it. Coach Fitzgerald played it. It was so much fun. It was a scorer's game. Coach Jensen scored 105 points in one game. Her average in high school was 66 points a game. Just crazy stuff.

But it was really fun, and you really learned how to shoot the ball. You learned how to be an offensive-minded person. Don't ask us about defense, but we could shoot the ball.

So I think that sticks with you a little bit. We still love our offense. I know -- I think we played some pretty good defense last night. Everybody keeps knocking our defense. I thought our defense was pretty good last night.

But offense is near and dear to us old six-on-sixers' hearts.

**Q. Just want to get your thoughts on LSU. They've got Angel Reese, a player that you guys are familiar with from her time at Maryland. Just interested in your thoughts on what they do well offensively. Then they're also a very good defensive team.**

LISA BLUDER: Excellent at both. I feel like, again, we're playing South Carolina almost with a little bit better shooters.

Angel Reese is a fabulous basketball player, and obviously we coached against her when she was at Maryland. We coached against Poole when she was at Ohio State. So we do have some familiarity with these players.

Angel just seems to be playing a little bit more free at LSU. I mean, averaging 23 points a game. She shoots the ball incredibly well. But 6 1/2 offensive rebounds? We're going against another rebounding monster team. They're just incredibly good at that.

So we have our work cut out for us, but we feel like it's a lot like playing South Carolina.

**Q. Defensively last night, what did you like most about how your team executed on that side of the court? And I have one more quick one after this.**

LISA BLUDER: I just like how they stuck to the game plan no matter what. Even if they made a three here or there, they didn't panic. They tried their hardest at boxing out, but Cardoso is just too hard to box out. I told Addy O'Grady,

get your volleyball girl on right now, because she was a pretty good volleyball player.

I think I liked that. I think I liked that they just believed in the game plan. They stuck to it. I thought Gabbie Marshall was so good. Zia Cooke had 18 the first half. She had 6 the second half. McKenna Warnock, Kate Martin, what they do for us defensively, obviously a lot of attention goes to Caitlin's offense, but their defense, they were tough.

**Q. For Caitlin Clark, from the time she stepped on campus and put on that Iowa uniform her freshman year and averaged 27 points, it's not like she just came upon the scene yesterday and had a 41-point performance. But she has sustained her excellence. How have you seen her game evolve from day one to today?**

LISA BLUDER: I think I've just seen more of a trust in her teammates. When she came from high school, a lot of those players -- it's no knock on high school players, but they couldn't -- they weren't anticipating her passes and ready for them, ready to catch them, have the hands that a Monika Czinano has, weren't quite ready to shoot. So she didn't quite have that trust, and we had to build that up over time.

Obviously it's there now. But, yeah, she's been a spectacular offensive player. Her three-point range has increased since she's been at Iowa, and a lot of that has been from the weight room and the job that our strength coach, Coach Alexander, does with our team. She put on eight pounds of muscle. I know you can't tell, but she did. She put on eight pounds of muscle this summer, and that's also helped her sustain some of the physicalness that she sees every day.

**Q. You and Jan together for 23 years planting the seeds of hope when you come over from Drake. This was part of the dream, I'm sure, to be here with a best friend. How many people have made plans with best friends and roads eventually split. To stay the path the whole time and be there with her and that friendship, have you got a chance to reflect on that? What does that mean to everybody staying the course?**

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, it's also Jenni Fitzgerald. She came with us. She and Jan started the same year. So I coached with both of them just as long. Jan is unbelievable with our post. Jenni is unbelievable with our scouts. She does such a great job breaking down film.

This year we had a lapse where I had a coach that was out two months with having a baby, and Abby Stamp had a baby. Coach Fitzgerald -- I'm lucky enough that I have a

person with 30 years of Division I coaching experience that could step into that role and actually coach for that time. It was seamless, the transition.

The three of us have really -- we call ourselves the three amigos. We've been together a long time. It's not the three stooges, it's the three amigos, okay? We've been together a long time, and this was definitely a dream. It feels very good to have it come to reality.

**Q. I'm going to ask you to talk a little bit about yourself. You put South Carolina in some positions yesterday that few teams have been able to. So I'm curious how do you think you've grown as a coach throughout the season and continued throughout this run?**

LISA BLUDER: I'm not sure if I'm much different as a coach honestly from -- I don't know. I think I've coached the same way for a lot of years. But when you get some super talent, right? That makes a difference. It makes an incredible difference.

So I think I'm the same person. I really have pretty much run a lot of the same offensive philosophy. I don't really think that I've changed that much. I'm pretty ordinary and just blessed with some really great talent.

**Q. Your team yesterday just showed enormous poise through the whole game. How did it get to that point? I mean, the same thing, I think you could say, in the Louisville game. But through the course of the season, how did they solidify and mature to the point where nothing seemed to bother them yesterday?**

LISA BLUDER: We led that game for almost 36 minutes yesterday. Whether it got close, honestly, I did not see any hesitation in their eyes. What Kate Martin was saying to the team, between the third and the fourth quarter, was keep the gas on. Let's keep going. Let's not play not to lose, but let's play to win.

I thought the team did that. Maybe because we never had a significant lead that we were not able to play like that really. But honestly this team didn't waver in their belief ever during that game.

**Q. You've talked about maintaining this same approach throughout the tournament. Kate Martin said a lot about the power of visualization. Despite all that mental preparation you try to do ahead of time, what's surprised you about the run that you've made this far?**

LISA BLUDER: What has surprised me? Honestly, we believed. We really did. I know you guys were surprised

we beat South Carolina, and we were happy that we were able to, but we weren't surprised. So I don't know -- I guess what would surprise me the most is the unbelievable Iowa support we've had here and how many fans that we've turned into Iowa Hawkeye fans.

When you can't even do an ESPN interview at the end because it's so loud with people chanting "let's go Hawks" in this arena, that's pretty neat. People didn't fly here. They got in their cars, and they drove here, and that's a long drive.

It's been like that everywhere we've been. We had 9,000, 10,000 fans in Minneapolis, a five-hour drive away. We had people in Seattle, and we had people here in Dallas.

I guess what surprises me the absolute most is the level of love that the Iowa Hawkeye fans commit to this team.

**Q. The players always talk about, why not us? They said you kind of started that mentality. How did that start?**

LISA BLUDER: I just said it one day. It's just basically, you know, I mean, why not us? We're here. It's kind of self-explanatory. Why can't we be that person?

I always talk about people have these dreams, and they get so close to their dreams and they quit. They don't know how close they are, right? You don't know how close you are to finishing -- you probably know how close you are to finishing the marathon when you hit the wall, but there's so many times that you're about to get that sale, or you're about to get something, and you just give up.

So we talk a lot about that, like we're not giving up. Just keep going. Keep going. Why not us? Why not us be the people that are at the top of the ladder at the end?

**Q. Last night I saw a lot of Iowa fans here obviously, and I even saw some Virginia Tech fans who started cheering for you all after their game. What is it about your team and just the culture that you have that you think attracts fans in that way?**

LISA BLUDER: Well, I just think our team is personal. They're not scared to show their human side. They play with a joy. They play with teamwork. They celebrate each other. They build each other up.

It's the American dream, right? Everybody wants to be a part of a team that really loves each other and cares about each other. I think you can see that in our team by the way we play.

**Q. It's sort of a two-parter: We talked last night about how that game was maybe the highlight, the number one of your career, where you've had so much -- NAIA, Final Fours, right up through Missouri Valley, right to the present. I guess I just wondered two parts. One, whether you've stopped to think about what tomorrow is going to be like within the context of that career you've had, and also just as an Iowa native, what it means for you to be the one doing this at this moment?**

LISA BLUDER: I'm proud to be an Iowa girl leading the University of Iowa. I grew up 30 minutes from campus. I didn't go to the University of Iowa. I didn't get a scholarship offer in the '70s there. Both my brothers went to Iowa. My kids, both my daughters have went through the University of Iowa.

So it means a lot for me as an Iowan to represent our state. Iowans are, we're proud of our state. We believe we feed the world. We really do. We believe in hard work. We believe in honesty and integrity, and I want that to shine through with my team because I want my team to have the values of what we represent back home.

As far as the magnitude of tomorrow's game, no, I haven't really given it much thought yet. It's LSU on my scout, and I'm trying to get ready for it.

**Q. You came into the locker room last night and said, this is our destiny. And the players have been saying that for a while now. When do you remember feeling that -- or thinking or preaching or talking -- that this run is this team's destiny?**

LISA BLUDER: I think, if I remember right, it was probably right before the NCAA Tournament started because it was just like kind of ironic, some of the things that were happening. Like we have Georgia, we played UCF last year in Carver, so we knew them. That was a tough game. The Georgia game was a tough game.

I don't know if we wouldn't have scheduled them. We scheduled UCF to play in Carver in December, and Florida's coming to Iowa in December, and we were able to play them and that helped us get ready for that game.

There's just been a lot of those type of things. This team is similar to this team. Colorado was at our place last year, so we had a scout already on them from last year. Just so many weird things have happened that we feel it is destiny.

**Q. Obviously you want to celebrate that win last night. You want to make sure that people understand a lot of teams don't get to this point, but you've got to finish**



**the job. If you lose tomorrow, no one's really going to care that you slayed the giant that is South Carolina. How do you find that balance with your team of making sure they're allowed to enjoy that win but also understand we've still got one more to go?**

LISA BLUDER: I have a really smart group, and they understand that. If we lose tomorrow, it will still be a big deal to me that we beat South Carolina and that we played in this game.

But, yes, our intent is to go out there and win, and I know that moving on to the next chapter is so important in preparation. You can't be celebrating last game.

We keep talking, move on to the next one. You can't worry about what's in the rearview mirror. You can't worry about the next thing. Be where you are right now. My team has been where their feet are the whole time. So that's all I can ask.

And I think they'll be where their feet are tomorrow on this championship floor.

**Q. You've been around this a minute. When you think about that young girl that played at UNI to now -- and I want to talk about the game of women's basketball and where it's come and the fans, the TV ratings that are superseding NBA games. Have you had time to think about that, your role in it, your team's role in it, and what that means?**

LISA BLUDER: I think my team has had a role in it. I do. I think people are talking about the Iowa Hawkeyes, obviously talking about Caitlin Clark, and that's so good. It's so good when people are talking about women's basketball, and we're having debates about who's the best player, and it's passionate debates. That's so good for our game.

When I played at UNI, we might have had 200 people in the stands if you count my husband twice. I mean, it just wasn't much. You might have gotten a paragraph in the back page of the UNI -- I can't remember what it was called now. I should know, but I don't.

I mean, people just didn't care. People didn't take us seriously. We had one set of practice gear. I wore Brooks tennis shoes. We got one pair for the year.

Then my first job, I drove the van, and I had to recruit my husband to drive the other one sometimes. We were telling the story yesterday how we stopped at a rest stop one time, and I left a player there, Wendy White. Two exits later, we realized Wendy wasn't in the van, and we had to

spin around and go get her. She was standing there on the side of the highway, so we got her.

It was just a different time. And I'm so glad, I'm so glad that I got to grow up during this time. I'm so glad I have a respect for the women that went before me that helped lay the ground work. People -- obviously, Vivian Stringer, Pat Summitt, Tara, Dr. Grant. I'm so thankful, and I know Dr. Grant would be so happy right now if she could be a part of this, and I know she's so thrilled for us.

Yeah, it's come leaps and bounds. I know Dr. Grant would say, it's not still good enough, though. And it probably isn't. We still have work to do, but we're getting there. And I am so glad I got to see what it was because I have an appreciation for it now.

**Q. You mentioned how great your defense was last night.**

LISA BLUDER: "Great" might be a strong word.

**Q. Good? Some of the LSU players noted the way you dared their guards to shoot a little bit, and I'm just wondering, without giving away too much of your game plan, if that might have to change a little bit considering the way Alexis Morris is playing right now --**

LISA BLUDER: And Poole.

**Q. And their ability? And Poole.**

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, they can shoot the ball better, no doubt. We'll have to change things up.

**Q. After Caitlin Clark's first game, you said, this is what we expected. You talked about things she's done to improve her game, but what has surprised you against what she's done? Also Monika as well. 18 points against South Carolina is no small feat. What has surprised you about those players?**

LISA BLUDER: I am so happy for Monika. Monika was not highly recruited out of high school at all, and we saw something in her. We saw somebody that would embrace the contact and got down there and sealed and worked really hard on that. There's a lot of big girls that don't want to be down there, that don't want to embrace the contact, but we run a system where we needed a post like a Megan Gustafson, that would embrace that contact and people that we've had before that.

I don't even think we took a chance on her. We believed in her. Her shot was messed up when she came. It was bad.

Her freshman year, her shot was really messed up, and she'll tell you this.

Honestly, it was all of her hard work. Between her freshman and sophomore year, she was in the gym doing soft touch over and over and over again, back to the fundamentals. Then are you kidding? She leads the country in field goal percentage shooting?

Her junior and senior year -- I think she's in the top four right now this year. That is an unbelievable success story, and she did it through her hard work and her belief in Coach Jensen's post development. So that's pretty cool.

Caitlin, where have I seen her grow? What has surprised me? I don't -- honestly, don't take your eyes off Caitlin. Nothing surprises me anymore. Honestly, I see it every day in practice. She practices like she plays. You guys, these are things we see every single day. It's hard to surprise us right now.

What I'm most proud about with her is just her composure on the court, her ability to mission focus. She used to be a little bit of a wild card out there as far as her emotions, and I think she still plays with joy, but she's not letting her emotions get to her in a negative way. I think she had to learn that a little bit.

**Q. Actually to follow up on that, Coach Bluder, after the NC State loss, I remember Caitlin said, I scored 40 points, but we don't win and, look, we only had 10 assists. That's not who we are. You've mentioned how she's grown about playing with other players, but to me she's even grown every single game this season. You can see that. Can you talk a little bit about that progress from her even since that game with NC State?**

LISA BLUDER: I think the Maryland game it was so apparent for us. When we lost at Maryland, they did a box and one on her and just denied her, denied her, and wouldn't let her touch the ball. Everybody tries to keep the ball out of her hands. Everybody does. But it was different there. I think then she realized I really, really need my teammates.

She's always known it this year, but I think that was an example of, wow, I've got to really pour into my teammates because they're going to carry us if we want to go far.

**Q. I wanted to follow up on the bar fight thing briefly, if you don't mind. The full quote was complimentary of South Carolina's offensive rebounding. I was wondering if you were a little surprised with the way maybe Dawn took that quote, and just clarify that was**

**no ill intent in what you said there.**

LISA BLUDER: There was absolutely no ill intent. I know coaches will take things and spin it to try to motivate their team. I've done that, I'm sure. So be it with that.

Yeah, I really meant it as a compliment, like you are going to have to fight harder than you've ever fought in your life to get a defensive rebound against this team because they are so good. That's what my intent was.

**Q. I know you've been up on the ladder. You've felt the confetti and all that stuff. What have you done, has the team done, to visualize winning a National Championship?**

LISA BLUDER: I haven't done anything yet. I still have to process that a little bit today and work on that. But we'll come up with something.

**Q. I know you had mentioned Angel Reese's prowess on the offensive boards. Can you just conceptualize how she is just in general rebounding and the challenge it presents tomorrow?**

LISA BLUDER: I mean, 6 1/2 rebounds a game, that's incredible. Offensive. Offensive. 16 rebounds total, but 6 1/2, that's what impresses the heck out of me.

It's so hard to guard that because, like you saw last night, you give up three-point plays then too a lot of times. You give up the offensive rebound. They score. You're out of position. You try to contest, you get a foul, three-point play. Worst play in basketball in my opinion, the old fashioned three-point play with a foul.

We had too many of them last night. But Angel does that. She's able to do that. She's so agile down there. Different type of then Aliyah Boston, who I thought was more physical. I think Angel is a better ball handler, will bring the ball down the floor, but she's more just more agile. Very hard to guard.

We're going to have our work cut out for us for sure.

**Q. If you were an opposing coach game planning to stop Caitlin Clark, what would you do?**

LISA BLUDER: Pray.

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