

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

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



RICK NIXON: We are joined by Lisa Bluder from Iowa.

Lisa, I'll turn it to you. A quick opening statement, then we'll take some questions.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, just thankful to have the opportunity to return to a Final Four. It's really special to do once, but to do it twice feels really great.

I have such a wonderful group of young women. I hope that everybody gets the chance to meet them and get to know them because they're unbelievable young women who just happen to play basketball.

Very blessed to be at a great school that supports their basketball program so much like the University of Iowa.

RICK NIXON: Thanks, Coach.

First question...

Q. I wanted to ask you about kind of the Teflon that your players have played with all year. The pressure for a calendar year has been intense. Last night could have been like many others in the school's history of falling short. Instead they pushed through. What is it about this team that enables them that when times get tough, they rise to the occasion?

LISA BLUDER: I think it's maturity, quite honestly. They've been there before, they know what it's like. Once you know what it's like and what it requires, it's a little bit easier to follow that same recipe again.

We have been in some tough situations. The leadership of Kate Martin and Caitlin and Gabbie has been extraordinary. So I really credit those guys for that.

But honestly, I think that it would be unusual for us to not have the situation where the atmosphere is just crazy. I mean, that's what we're used to playing in. So I think it would be unusual for us not to have that kind of craziness around one of our games.

Q. What does it mean to you to see Gabbie Marshall evolve such and every game, and what makes her such a special player?

LISA BLUDER: Gabbie Marshall, first of all, is our player that we put on the best perimeter defensive player every single game. Last night she played 40 minutes for us.

She's a trooper. She'll go do whatever we ask her to do. We tell her to go over screens, under screens, choke off this person. It doesn't matter. She remembers her scout, her personnel, and she gets the job done that way.

And obviously everybody likes the points and things. Don't leave her open because she's a sniper out there, too. She didn't get many opportunities last night. She was 1-3. That was 50% adjusted field goal percentage. I'll say that any day.

Q. Your team has dealt with unprecedented hype for the season considering the run you've had. How much do you feel like in some ways that's prepared you to coming to this Final Four in Cleveland, which this may be considered the most hyped, most anticipated Women's Final Four ever?

LISA BLUDER: I think it has done wonders for us to prepare for this opportunity. It goes back to at the end of last year, playing in the championship game, to starting this year with our Crossover at Kinnick, the football stadium having 56,000 people come out to watch us play. It's been every single situation whether we're home or away.

I think being in those type of situations, kind of having a lot of media around us all year long is going to bode well for us at the Final Four where it even intensifies a little bit more.

Q. You're 0-3 against Kim Mulkey before last night in

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post-season play. Is there any validation with that win? Also, you got a little bit of heat last summer for not doing the transfer portal thing. Does this kind of prove that your roster as is was still pretty elite?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, thanks.

First of all, yeah, we were 0-3 against Coach Mulkey. She's had tremendous teams, obviously, over the years. Unbelievable Hall-of-Fame coach. It feels good, not that we beat her, but we got to go to the Final Four, and we beat a really good LSU team.

Again, I have so much respect for Kim and what she has accomplished over her unbelievable career.

The transfer portal, there's a lot of people in transfer portal, and last year we were looking for specific things in the transfer portal. We didn't find what we were looking for.

You have to be special to play at the University of Iowa. It's not just a basketball factory. We don't take just the best basketball players. We pick the best basketball players that fit our culture. We don't want to bring somebody in that wouldn't fit our culture.

Again, our numbers were very few because we were only looking at very specific positions. We wanted to make sure if we brought somebody in, it was going to be somebody that was an impact player, not just a role player, but an impact player right away.

Those numbers were kind of limited. It does give us a little bit of feeling of satisfaction that, yeah, we had just enough. We had enough with what we had. That's gratifying.

Q. The first moment after that buzzer sounds, you turned and hugged Jan Jensen, who obviously has been with you for such a long time on your staff. Take me through what it means to have this breakthrough with Jan and just generally speaking what your conversations with her were like around this moment.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, we've had a lot of good conversations since then.

Yeah, Jan and Jenni Fitzgerald are the two that I sit by on the bench. I have so much trust. I have trust in all my stuff. I have the best staff. There is no doubt. They have scouts ready. They work hard. They're organized. They're loyal. They know the game so well. I am blessed with an amazing staff.

Jan happened to be the first one I saw when I turned around, probably because she sits next to me. It's special

to share that moment with her just because we've been through a lot of years together.

Jenni Fitzgerald came over at the same time as Jan Jensen from Drake with me. Those two, they're everything to me really.

I have a custom after every game, I shake every one of my assistants' hands because I'm so proud of them and I want to acknowledge the work they've done.

Last night it went from handshakes to hugs real quick.

Q. Do you think it says something about the way you operate in this program that you have these assistants who are with you for such a long time?

LISA BLUDER: I hope so. For one thing, they are my best friends. It's always easier to go through good times and bad times when you have people that you really care with you.

I think Iowa, at the University of Iowa, it's a great place to be. We don't have a lot of turnover of any coaches at the University of Iowa. When you look at the longevity of all of our head coaches, it's pretty amazing. It's a great place. It's a great place to be a coach of women's basketball when it is supported so well from the administration to the community to the state, all across the board.

Hopefully I give my assistants the ability to do their jobs without looking over their shoulders. I don't want to be a micromanager. I let them have a lot of freedom. I think they enjoy that they know they're fully involved in every win, that they can fully feel great about taking credit for that.

Q. We've talked about all the experiences you've had this year, big crowds, different teams. Is there anything from making the Final Four last year that you feel like will be really important to draw upon this week?

LISA BLUDER: Yes, I do.

I think really managing outside... There's so much that goes on at a Final Four as far as media obligations, celebrations, open practices. It's hard to almost try to do all of that and your job as far as having your team prepared.

I think we wore ourselves out last year trying to be all things to all people and do everything. So I think we're going to be a little more selective this year on what we do and how long we're at events.

We certainly want to be at all of Caitlin's awards, but maybe this year we're not going to have the whole team at every single one of 'em because it got to be a lot. I need them to really lock in and rest. I think at this time of year, recovery is so important.

Q. It feels like you went through a Final Four to get to the Final Four. I know the job's not done yet, but is there a sense of the pressure's off a little bit? Has it been lessened a little bit by getting here?

LISA BLUDER: I mean, it just feels great. I mean, I don't know if it's less pressure. It just feels darn good to be in a Final Four again because it's such a hard accomplishment. To go through the whole year and avoid injuries -- and we have had an injury to one of our starters, and I'm hoping she'll be back for next weekend. We'll see. But to manage all that, to go through a season and have enough success you get a No. 1 seed, that's really hard to do. That's the first time that we've done that.

Then you go through hosting those two games, then coming here. Everybody you play is just so good and you're going against unbelievable coaches.

I kind of went off on a tangent and forget what your actual question was (smiling).

Q. Just the pressure being off.

LISA BLUDER: Honestly, people thought we had a lot of pressure coming in. People kept telling me, This is so hard, your season is going to be so hard.

I kept saying, Why are we focusing on the hard? Why are we doing that?

Billie Jean King is one of my idols, she has a book, "Pressure is a Privilege." I've used that book this year. She wrote that on a piece of paper; it's framed in my locker room for me.

We believe that pressure is a really good thing because that means you've done some pretty special things to have pressure on you.

Q. You've had a little bit of time to kind of digest what Caitlin was able to do last night. Given the scene, the stage, what was on the line, what more can you say about what she was able to deliver?

LISA BLUDER: Again, when the stage is the brightest, when the spotlight is the brightest, she's at her very best. She loves this.

Some people wither in the moment. She just gets stronger in the moment. When it's her time, I mean, she's going to just shine.

I mean, her distant threes last night were spectacular. We asked her to try to get to the rim in the first quarter. I thought she did. She did a great job of that. We wanted her to get some high-percentage easy ones to begin with, and she did.

In the third quarter, when she took that distant three and she nailed it to get us going, I knew then we were in good shape. Again, I never want to talk about her without talking about her passing. Absolutely unbelievable. 12 assists last night. Her passing is extraordinary, as well as her distant shooting.

Q. At one point she's in the front court with Angel, you're kind of running down the sideline. Were you telling her to pull it out or yelling, Trail her?

LISA BLUDER: I'm trying to remember that situation. I'm not sure that I remember that exact situation right now.

Q. I'm assuming you were referring to Molly Davis, hoping she'd be back for this weekend.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, that's who I'm referring to. I really don't have any idea. I know she wasn't able to go last night. She hasn't been into a practice since this situation happened to her.

I just hope for her sake that she can get into a game again. I don't know how effective she's going to be, but I just want her to have the right to be in an NCAA tournament game for her fifth and final year.

Q. Turning to UConn, what is going to be the key to slowing down Paige Bueckers and trying to move on to the championship game?

LISA BLUDER: I have no idea. I haven't looked at UConn. I haven't looked at our scout yet. I have given myself about 20 hours that I'm going to enjoy this one. When I get on that plane in about an hour, I'll start working on UConn, but not till then.

Q. Is there any extra motivation facing UConn, not to bring up the tournaments of past, but after that loss in 2021? Is there any extra motivation for Caitlin? If I remember correctly, she and Paige Bueckers were part of the same recruiting class. Paige got a lot of national attention. I don't recall Caitlin getting as much. Is there any extra motivation for her to get the best of

Paige Bueckers?

LISA BLUDER: You know, Paige is playing really well. She's a great player. She was the national Player of the Year coming out of high school. Just a tremendous, tremendous player.

We try not to make it be situations where it's this person versus this person or this team versus this team. We just really try to focus on Iowa.

That's what we want to focus on. We don't want to focus on rivalries or paybacks or anything like that. That's just not us.

Q. I'm at Channel 5 in Cleveland. We're excited to have you guys come. What should Cleveland expect hosting a Final Four?

LISA BLUDER: Well, you've done it before. I've been there for a Final Four. This time I get to play a game versus I think I was interviewing assistant coaches or something at that point. I did go to a really nice Italian restaurant when I was there. Of course, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

I think Cleveland should expect some unbelievable basketball. The fans that are going to be there, these are passionate fans. These are fans that know basketball. They are going to come to have a great time in Cleveland, and they're going to be cheering their hearts out. I think it's going to be a great stop in Cleveland.

Q. You mentioned you're going to be more selective at events. Will there be any interaction with the community for stars like Caitlin?

LISA BLUDER: I doubt it. I really doubt that there will be anything in the community with her.

Q. What does last night mean for women's basketball as a whole?

LISA BLUDER: Well, I mean, you got four great programs coming to the Final Four. I think there was a lot of attention on both games last night, but certainly there was a lot of attention on our game just because it was a rematch of the national championship last year.

Again, we didn't look at it like that, but a lot of people outside of our program did. So I'm sure the viewership was high. I think everybody that was here in the arena seemed to have a really good time and enjoyed the game.

Anytime that we have the chance to elevate women's

basketball and to showcase just how great our game is, we're going to take full advantage of that.

Q. Obviously Caitlin Clark has been a really big story during the tournament, but Sydney Affolter's performances have really caught my attention. Can you explain how impressed you've been with her adjustments back into the starting lineup and how she has allowed your game plans to be tweaked and altered.

LISA BLUDER: Sydney has handled everything like a professional all year long. Started a couple games at the beginning of the year. Wasn't any reason why she came out of the starting lineup. We knew she was a great player.

I told her midyear, You're the six player in our league, you're the best six player, because you would be starting on most other teams.

Obviously when Molly Davis went down, it put her right into that position, and she just handled it beautifully. It was just effortless, her moving into the starting lineup. She played so many minutes with us up to that point. In practice we had her in with the starting group a lot of times. It really wasn't as hard as what you would think.

It does obviously hurt our depth, though. Had you a weapon like Sydney coming off the bench, that was pretty nice. But in the starting lineup, Sydney brings toughness, she brings versatility, she brings somebody that is going to dive on the floor for loose balls, going to rebound, going to be physical in the defensive side of things.

She's kind of that do-it-all player. She's a very blue-collar player. Just a great, great young lady.

Q. I wanted to take you back three years ago, San Antonio, you were in a bubble, the weight room was about the size of what most hotels would have for their patrons. Here three years later seats are going for \$5,000, whatever, for the Final Four. What can you explain about the rise of the sport in the last three years? It's kind of organic in most ways. Where can this go trajectory-wise? What are we looking at in five years?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I feel like it's so crazy when you think Caitlin's first year, she played in front of a bunch of cardboard cutouts, one being her dog, Bella.

To now, every arena we go to is sold out. SeatGeek and those things are making a lot of money off of Iowa women's basketball.

I think the rise has happened largely due to we're getting more media coverage. I mean, when nobody knows about you, it's hard to get fan support, it's hard to get enthusiasm behind your program. But because we are on national television now, because we are in the spotlight more as a sport, as women's basketball, people are talking about it. People are recognizing how good of a game it is. People get to know these stars.

In the men's game, they're there for one year and then they leave, the best players. In the women's game, they're staying for four years. I think that's really good for them because they can really develop their brand, but it's also good for our sport because the best players are still around as seniors and not playing in the league right away.

I think the trajectory of women's basketball is going to keep going. There are so many bright stars in this game. We saw one last night in Johnson. I mean, she's unbelievable.

There's great freshmen in the country that are going to keep growing this sport. Now they have a platform. Social media, there's a lot of bad things about social media, but there's a lot of good things as far as the support that they can build for themselves, their brands that they can build for themselves. And also just the life that social media can take, good or bad, but it's really helped spread the word.

Q. How does NIL play into that? We've seen Caitlin's countless commercials, but many of your players have their own deals. Early were you a little hesitant on it early and now fully embracing it? Has that helped promote the sport in a way we couldn't have thought of a few years ago?

LISA BLUDER: No, I've always believed in NIL. It's collectives, I didn't know about that. That, to me, I don't know. I still don't know about it.

NIL, being able to use your own name to have your own basketball camp or do a commercial, whatever it is you want to do, why not have that opportunity? Our players have learned so many great, valuable lessons business-wise, marketing-wise, PR-wise. I mean, it's been a class in itself what these young athletes have learned at an early age about financial management and about business.

You can't learn all that in a classroom. The experiences they've gained have been tremendous.

You're right, all of our players have some sort of NIL opportunity. But I think that when people see Caitlin in national commercials, that adds to that star power, right? It's more credibility. It's more visibility. It just continues to

add to the lure of a great basketball player.

Q. After the game last week against West Virginia, you talked about Hannah Stuelke, wanted to see a little bit more offensive aggressiveness. Can you speak on how she responded this week?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I thought in the Colorado game her rebounding was great, her defense was very good. Last night, that was a tough assignment for her. Angel Reese, she's a pro. She's a great player. She's got seniority on Hannah, got height, probably strength, I don't know.

She didn't back down to her, and I think that's a growth moment for Hannah. Hannah is still young, right? She didn't play that many minutes for us last year. She's just really ending her first year of being a starter for us.

I think she's tremendously talented, but she's also still a little bit green around the ears. She's still a little bit young. I think she stepped up to that challenge last night really, really well. I'm proud of her.

Q. Back to the question about social media, the growth of the game. How have you as a coach helped your athletes navigate this new water of social media? How have you helped your athletes navigate those waters? Obviously it's very different than what it used to be.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, you have that question backwards. It's what have they taught me about it? I'm not teaching them anything about social media. I rarely get on social media (smiling).

What I've done since the NCAA tournament has started is caution them, Let's not be on social media. Maybe you're going to post, but please don't read. They've done a really good job with it.

I'm a big believer, I told them this on day one, this is not just for the NCAA tournament, you look at social media, there will be a hundred things written about you. 99 of them are going to be great and one of them's bad. You are going to walk away remembering that one bad one, so don't read any of them.

I hope they listen to me. I don't know if they do for sure. I know they have made a pact to stay off of it during the NCAA tournament.

RICK NIXON: Coach Bluder, we appreciate you taking the time. Safe travels to Cleveland. We look forward to seeing you here.

LISA BLUDER: Thanks, Rick.

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