

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

Friday, April 5, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Hannah Stuelke

Caitlin Clark

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference

Iowa - 71, UConn - 69

LISA BLUDER: Couldn't be happier with our performance tonight in the second half. First half was a little rough for us, but you know, we really kept believing, and I'm just so proud of the character of these young women to maintain their composure through some pretty tough times in the first half. And we got it to within six at halftime and we felt good about that.

I thought Hannah Stuelke was amazing tonight. But we're really thrilled to be playing in the championship game for the second year in a row.

Q. Caitlin, we spoke about Hannah in February. You talked about wanting to get her more involved. The next game she scored 47 points. Here we are two months later and she has the game that she just had. Just take me through that process, what you've seen and what Hannah has done over this period of time to further establish herself?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think Hannah's tremendous. I think it's just the confidence and belief. I think tonight she played with an energy about herself of she really could go in there and dominate. She goes toe to toe with Aaliyah Edwards, who in my mind is one of the best players in the country. It was physical with her. Guarded her well. Boxed her out. And she wasn't afraid to take it at her either, I thought.

When they subbed in some post players off the bench, Hannah continued to go at them. And I'm just super happy for Hannah. She's worked so hard to be in this moment. She goes 5-for-7 from the free-throw line, made some big



free throws for us. She was definitely a difference maker.

I think this the Hannah we all know, just having that confidence within herself because we all have it in her. Just super happy for her.

Q. Hannah, what was working for you tonight? And how much has the confidence that your teammates have in your made a difference for you this season?

HANNAH STUELKE: I think the confidence is everything. Especially hearing Caitlin Clark talk about me like that, it gives me a confidence boost. I think anyone would say that. But they just fed me the ball very well. And the ball was going in for me tonight.

Q. What was UConn doing so well in the first half to limit your team to 26 points and to limit you, Caitlin, to six points?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, like, UConn is a really good defensive team, one of the best defensive teams we've seen all year. I think Nika did a tremendous job guarding me.

We got some good looks. They just didn't go in. And sometimes that's just what happens. We missed some easy bunnies around the rim.

But I think the best thing about our group is we went into the locker room at halftime and it wasn't, like, oh, come on, you've got to make shots. It was, no, stop turning the ball over and you're going to be perfectly fine.

We knew at some point our shots would go down. We put up 45 points in the second half, 25 in the third quarter. Came out in the fourth quarter, started really hot.

So I don't think it was like a freaking out about offense not working. I think it was just a it will come around. We didn't execute great, and we were only down six. We felt really confident in that. Nobody panicked. Everybody knew we just needed to clean it up a little bit, and that's exactly what we did.

HANNAH STUELKE: She never leaves me anything to say. Yeah.

Q. Caitlin, some of the shots in the first half obviously weren't falling late. There was a moment in the second quarter you drove the lane for a layup and it sounded like the Iowa fans knew right away that it was a big play because shooters often, when they're not hitting from long range, they'll drive inside. Is that something that was on your mind to do in that moment?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I think honestly my shots felt really good in the first half. Like, I thought a few of them were in. And sometimes that's what happens as a shooter. You get a little cold. I think I was, what, 0-for-6, and then finished 3-for-5 from the 3-point line in the second half. That's not too bad.

I think the biggest thing is don't fall in love with your 3-point shot. Get in the paint. Get some easy baskets. And that's kind of what I did. I would have liked to get my feet in the paint a little more in the second half.

But they played really good defense on me, honestly. When I started driving, they threw two people at me. They were going to make me give up the ball.

And I think that's one of the greatest ways our program has evolved over the course of me being in here. I used to feel like I had to do everything. Now, I have so much trust in my teammates and my teammates have so much trust in me. And I just knew they were going to make plays down the stretch.

Kate was huge down the stretch. Made big plays for us. And that's the reason we won the game. It wasn't just Caitlin, it wasn't just Hannah, it was all five players on the court came up and made big plays at really crucial times.

Q. Can you describe the wave of emotions just in those last 9.6 seconds, just, I mean, you go from the potential disappointment to the offensive foul and sort of the opportunity to kind of feel like you were going to (indiscernible)?

HANNAH STUELKE: I don't think I was ever worried about the game. You know, we had the chance to get a defensive stop, and that's what we did. Gabbie's great in those situations. She always comes up with big plays, whether it's a block or whatever.

CAITLIN CLARK: I agree. I think, you know, we had some costly turnovers there in our last two offensive possessions that isn't really like us. We had four turnovers in the second half, and two of them come late in the fourth

quarter. Those are situations we get put in all the time in practice, so you would like to execute them better.

But our group is so mature and experienced that you don't have time to worry about that. It happened, it's over, you better focus and move on to the next play.

Like Hannah said, Gabbie Marshall comes up with big plays all the time. You see it time and time again for us. And she doesn't get enough credit. She guards one of the best players in the country and really challenges her quite a bit.

Paige had a great game. I thought Gabbie played great defense on her. Even when Paige made tough baskets, Gabbie just responded and kept guarding her. I'm really proud of her. And I'm proud of our group for just being able to flip the page and move on to the next play.

Q. Caitlin, a lot of the talk was Caitlin versus Paige, but this was a team win tonight. How important is that for the confidence of everybody moving forward and for you as well?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think our team's confidence is pretty good at this point in the year. Obviously there's only one more game left to go. And that doesn't surprise me.

The reason we've won games all year long is because we play Iowa basketball. And that's sharing the ball, high assist numbers, low turnovers. Obviously would have liked to have more assists tonight but we didn't shoot the ball the greatest. Things like that.

I don't know, I mean, I think everybody's confidence has been at an all-time high throughout the Big Ten Tournament and during the NCAA Tournament. And that's how it needs to be and that's the reason we're at this point.

Going to the national championship game is, everybody's stepping up. It's not just me. It's not just one player. That's not what this is. We wouldn't be at this point right now if it was just one player. And everybody comes up and makes really big plays when we need them.

And Sydney Affolter has six offensive rebounds tonight. That's pretty incredible. So I think it's the small things. Everybody comes up and does little things that eventually changes the tide of the game. And we're able to win.

Q. Caitlin, what did Kate Martin do for you guys tonight?

CAITLIN CLARK: Well, poor Kate has gone quite a while without breaking her nose and having blood gushing out of

it. One of her last career games, she's on the floor and she has hurt her nose again. I don't know if it's broken or not.

I think Kate's just toughness, leadership, resiliency and leadership is the biggest thing. You see it -- Kate's a pro player. You see her game, she's hitting fadeaway jump shots, she's going at people.

The way she took over at the end of the fourth, she came up with, I think, six straight points for us. I'm just so proud of her. She's worked so hard over the course of the offseason. She knew she was going to be a focal point for us on offense. And I couldn't be more proud of her.

She's had a long career. All she's ever dreamed of is being a Iowa Hawkeye, and she embodies that every single day.

Q. Hannah, the game was very physical at times. They were calling nothing and then at other times they were calling a lot. Then obviously it ended with a big call. I wondered if you could talk about that. And also you got your hand on Caitlin's missed free throw and tipped it to Syd. You have to do it that way sometimes when the game is so physical?

HANNAH STUELKE: Yeah, the game is physical. It's basketball. Sometimes the refs are going to call it. Sometimes they aren't. We just had to play through it the whole game. I thought we did that pretty well.

Q. How do you guys plan on handling South Carolina's inside dominance?

CAITLIN CLARK: Well, I think the biggest thing is -- haven't gone over a scouting report yet -- I think just enjoying and celebrating this win. You have 24 hours to turn the page and move on.

The great thing about us is we're not going to stay in one defense for too long. We'll have a bunch of different things up our sleeves. We'll try a bunch of different things.

But South Carolina has been the top of the top. They're in a different league. We're going to do everything we can to try to be right there with them. But, yeah, I think the biggest thing is enjoy this tonight and we'll go over the scout early in the morning.

Q. Hannah, when did you realize that you needed to kick it in gear offensively when you saw that Caitlin was struggling offensively? And, Caitlin, this is the match-up everybody wanted to see, the rematch, South Carolina-Iowa. How do you feel about that match-up?

HANNAH STUELKE: I think from the jump I was being aggressive. I thought I prepared better for this game than I did for the last.

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it feels like every time we're going into a game in this NCAA Tournament it's like everybody wanted to see this, just one after the next. I think it's good for women's basketball.

I think being in this moment before I think gives our group a good understanding of what to expect. We know what South Carolina brings to the table. We know we're going to have our hands full.

The way that they played tonight was incredible. But it's the national championship. It's the last game of my career. It's the last game for five people on this team. So I don't think motivation will be hard to come by.

Q. When there was 1.1 seconds left you ended up I think throwing off Paige's back, wasting some time. Was that you did instinctually or something that you and coach had spoken about as a way to burn clock, or is that how the game played out something you did on your own?

CAITLIN CLARK: I watch a lot of basketball. I understand basketball. And she had her back turned to me. So the biggest point, the biggest thing at that point in the game you just want the clock to go down. I mean, you don't want to give them the ball, but she had her back completely turned, so I was trying to waste some clock. Just came to my brain and I went for it, and it kind of worked.

Q. Caitlin, on the possession before the offensive foul, could you talk about what you saw on that play and why you decided to make the pass rather than try to score yourself?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it was 39 seconds was the game clock, 30 on the shot clock. So a 9-second differential. I let it go down. I think I started to drive right at about 9 seconds, and Aaliyah Edwards was guarding her. And she was popping straight up to the top of the key, and Aaliyah Edwards completely left her to come double or show on me.

So the read is to give the ball up. Hannah made a great play. The other two girls helped in. They got a deflection on the ball and were able to get the ball and call timeout.

But that's the read. I'm giving the ball up 10 times out of 10. There's two people on me. I trust my teammates to make a play. And UConn just played great defense. I

think the biggest thing after that turnover we just went right back to the huddle and Gabbie came up with a huge defensive stop for us.

Q. In the stands it was deafening of the chants for you guys here tonight. What was it like essentially having all of Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse chanting, go Hawkeyes, go Iowa, for that entire game?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, I probably speak for both of us: When you're in the heat of the game, you don't hear it. You're locked in the game. You can hear the noise, but you're so focused on your teammates and what's going on in the game, you don't really hear it that much.

Once the game's over, you really appreciate it. But it's not surprising. I think the way our fans have traveled all year long, it's just been absolutely incredible. And Cleveland being driving distance from Iowa City and the state of Iowa, a lot of them made the trek. It makes the games a lot more fun for us. We're just super grateful.

Q. The game was obviously very physical. I'm wondering what you thought about that. And there were a lot of things that were not called and then the offensive call at the end. What did you see with that, in particular?

LISA BLUDER: I really didn't see the offensive call at the end. I was kind of blocked. I didn't see that. I thought that there was a lot of, like Caitlin really didn't have freedom of movement. But you know at this point that they're not going to call a lot, especially after last year when Caitlin and Angel were on the bench. I think you're just not going to see a lot of calls happening right now.

Q. What did you say to your team in the locker room at halftime?

LISA BLUDER: I was really proud of them. We got it cut to six points. We were down 12. We got it cut to a real manageable number by halftime. That's all you can ask. We came out really well in the third quarter. I thought our defense led to some good offense for us. It kind of got us rolling in that third quarter.

We just talked about valuing the ball. We just turned the ball over. Our defense was really pretty good. They scored 13 points off of our turnovers. So we take that out of the mix and it's a totally different half.

Q. Want to ask first about Kate Martin's game tonight. And ask you where does the confidence come from to go into the locker room in the national semifinal and say, we're okay, let's just go back to what we're doing,

with the stakes and the atmosphere?

LISA BLUDER: Because it's the only thing you can do, right? Truly, it's do or die. And you have to do what you do best. We were not playing Iowa, what we call Iowa basketball in the first half. We weren't passing the ball. We were turning the ball over too much.

But I was pleased with our defense and our rebounding. We outrebounded them by eight in this game.

So we just thought, let's get back to valuing the ball, trying to get some stops, we can get some pushes. And honestly, everybody was feeling pretty good at that point.

You try not to think about the end, right? That's just -- and when you start thinking about, oh, if we don't do this we're going to lose, you're going to lose. So it was all forward-facing, all forward-moving. And we were going to try to come out and win that game.

Kate Martin, what a warrior. That kid, she was not going to be denied in that fourth quarter. Some of those takes she had to the basket, turnarounds, strong jumpers, you know, I don't know what happened to her nose. But we obviously saw a lot of blood.

That poor kid has broken her nose I think every single year she's been at Iowa. But she's a warrior. She's a leader. She's the heart and soul of our team.

Q. Early on, there was a timeout, and then coming out of it you guys went to Hannah a couple of times. Seemed like that was a point of emphasis. Was there a conversation that went along with it in that decision-making process?

LISA BLUDER: We felt like when we got our first foul on Aaliyah, we had to go at her. She's such a good player. I always tell the team the easiest way to guard somebody is to put them on the bench. I thought we did a good job of ISOing her and letting Hannah draw another foul.

Q. Has it hit you yet that you only have one game left with Caitlin? And what's been your favorite part of watching her grow on the court?

LISA BLUDER: No, it hasn't hit me that I only have one game with her. That's going to be rough because it's been such a joy to coach her and to be part of watching women's basketball grow and be excited about her.

Q. What's been your favorite part about watching her grow on the basketball court?

LISA BLUDER: It's been her maturity. It's been her leadership. It's this kind of game a few years ago she would have gotten so frustrated. She would have been really upset in the huddles. She wasn't that at all. And sometimes people can feed off of her if she's like emotionally in a bad way.

So I thought that her composure in the huddle, even when things weren't going well for her in the first half, was really a sign of her growth.

Q. You beat a legend like Geno Auriemma and now you're taking on another legend in Dawn Staley. How are you able to -- what's the mentality going into the next game? And obviously this is a game that everybody wanted to see, Iowa/South Carolina. Talk about it a little bit for us.

LISA BLUDER: First of all, I mean, going against Geno, he's one of the best minds in our game. He is unbelievable. I mean, the success that he's had. He's been dealt a really tough hand this year with all the injuries.

For him to be in this game with all the injuries that he had to some of his star players is unbelievable.

So my hat's off to Geno like it always is, because he's somebody that has been very, very successful in our game.

Going against Dawn tomorrow, obviously, again, our Olympic coach. Everybody's pretty good at this level, though. When you're getting into the Final Four, you're going to go against good coaches and you're going to have great players. We'll just be excited to give it a try tomorrow.

Q. You and Caitlin, in particular, have talked for weeks, months about getting Hannah to have more confidence and play with that confidence. Seeing that transform tonight or kind of play out tonight, how meaningful is that? And how did you guys get her to do that?

LISA BLUDER: You know, we elected her to put on the Iowa, slap that on the chart tonight to go to the championship game. We just kept telling her how good she was. Honestly, the only thing that stopped her from being great was her own self. It was her own doubt.

And she is a beautiful athlete, an explosive athlete, and she just held herself back. And so we're trying to talk to her about positive self-talk instead of negative self-talk, and kept pouring into her about you can do this. You can be such a beast if you want to be.

And so I'm just so pleased with her growth tonight. She just took, as a sophomore -- a young sophomore -- she took another big leap tonight.

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