

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: South Carolina vs Iowa

Saturday, April 6, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: At this time, we'll open up the floor for questions for Coach.

Q. This morning I asked Coach Staley about the issue of allowing transgender women, biological males, to play women's sports. I wanted to give you the opportunity to give your opinion on that topic as well.

LISA BLUDER: Thank you for the question. I understand it's a topic that people are interested in. But today my focus is on the game tomorrow, my players. It's an important game we have tomorrow, and that's what I want to be here to talk about. But I know it's an important issue for another time.

Q. As you prepare for tomorrow, in dealing particularly with South Carolina's size, Kamilla Cardoso certainly, but their size overall as a team, what do you see when you study them, and what's your plan to do with it?

LISA BLUDER: This is a team that just doesn't have a lot of weaknesses. It's really hard to defend them. You know, Kamilla's been playing so well, just runs the floor beautifully, rebounds incredibly, shooting the ball well.

One person can't stop her. There's no way. I don't know if two or three can stop her, to be quite honest. So I'm not going to give that up just to one person to have to try to handle that.

Q. I know you're in denial that tomorrow's the last game you get to coach Caitlin, but she is going to go pro. I wondered, you've been around the game a long time, you've sent a lot of kids to play in the pros, what type of pro do you think she's going to be? How quickly will parts of her game translate, and what parts will those be?

LISA BLUDER: Can she still change her mind? Is that possible? I don't know. I would like that very much.

How much -- I don't know if that's a good question for me or for a WNBA coach, to be quite honest. Obviously she's going to have great people around her. And if you put great people around her, that helps her succeed so much. So I think that's going to be a benefit.

If she's with the Fever, playing with somebody like Aaliyah Boston, I think they could really have fun together. I think they'll be a great one-two punch.

She's going to be really tired after this season. That's what concerns me the most. Rookies go into the WNBA, which is such a challenging time, at their most exhausted time. That's a little bit kind of unfair for them.

I just know that Caitlin has stepped up to every challenge that we've posed to her. And I expect the same thing at the next level, although I know it's going to be -- she's going to have to pay her rookie dues.

Q. You talked last night about the maturity and the growth that Caitlin has shown emotionally as a floor leader. Can you think of any one story that really stood out to you when you realized, like, oh, okay, she's getting it or she's different than she might have been as a freshman or a sophomore or even last year?

LISA BLUDER: It's not been this change from A to B, like happened so fast. It's been a growth over time. We've seen her sometimes regress and go back to kind of emotional -- and I don't like to say -- you know, like, passionate, take-me-out-of-my-game emotional versus now, I think she is playing unbelievable in this tournament.

A lot of people have eyes upon her, and everybody wants to see her have that reaction, and she's not giving it to people. I love that about her. I think she's keeping her composure extremely well, still playing with that fire and that passion and that joy, but at the same time, not letting other people kind of get into her head or anything like that.

Or accepting, if she thinks a call is bad, kind of accepting that and moving on to the next play. And we always talk about, like every coach does, controlling the controllables. That's something you can't control, and you have to move on.

She's learning and has learned that over the course of this year really, really well. So I'm not sure there's been a point. I think it's been a gradual improvement.

Q. There's been a lot of discourse about the offensive foul call last night, and Gabbie just said she's gotten a lot of hate comments for the call that was made, even though she didn't make the call. I'm just wondering how you feel about the fact that she's been targeted like this with a bunch of negativity based off of what happened last night?

LISA BLUDER: It's unbelievable to me that you're going to criticize a 22-year-old kid for something that she had no control over? I thought we handled that really well. We switched out onto it. I thought we were there to contest.

I can't believe people would be so immature as to attack a 22-year-old on doing their job and doing it really, really well.

Q. Sort of along those lines, your team has been under the spotlight all season, in part because of Caitlin. And obviously she has a little bit more of that than everyone else. For the rest of society, for people holding cameras, how can we make life easier for the next Caitlin Clark, whoever she might be?

LISA BLUDER: That's a great question. I haven't given thought to that. Every kid is different. Every human being is different. I think the way that Caitlin has handled this has been almost textbook on how to manage outside expectations and all the extra media.

I would tell another kid, a child or player coming up, you can all say no. You don't have to do everything. You don't have to answer every question. You don't have to do every interview.

We've done, I think, a very good job, I think our sports information department has done a very good job of limiting Caitlin's requests because she would want to say yes to everybody because that's the type of person she is. Most young women want to say yes all the time to people who want to have a request like that.

I would really caution them on having a good sports information protector around her. And also it's okay to say no and don't let it get to your head.

Q. A couple of your players in one-on-one interviews singled out Sydney as an X factor. How important has she been for you guys?

LISA BLUDER: Extremely. We haven't lost since she moved into the starting lineup. She's playing exceptional basketball. She was before, but now she has this unbelievable opportunity, and she has just risen to the occasion. Some people might not do that.

We've called her Chicago tough, and she is. She is a person that you can see last night, jumping on the floor for loose balls, get six offensive rebounds. You want me to defend that? That's okay, I'll do that. She doesn't back down to anybody. I think her play has helped us reach this level, no doubt.

Q. Caitlin talked about post-game, and earlier today about savoring every moment knowing that tomorrow's her last game. Have you caught yourself appreciating even the small things? DO you have examples of that? Tomorrow's not only the last game for Caitlin, but for this team.

LISA BLUDER: I think we've been doing that all along. Ever since she made her decision, we've been intentional about remembering moments or spending time. Today I got to have breakfast with her. Just valuing that time and remembering it, like making sure you're there.

Like when you're having time with your seniors, don't be distracted by scouting reports or by phones and that sort of stuff, but actually being there. To me, that's been important for all five of my seniors.

Q. I probably know the answer, but another senior who's in her last game is Molly Davis. Is there any chance she could even get on the court for even a couple seconds? Also, how do you get the most out of Hannah like you did last night in a game like this?

LISA BLUDER: I would love for Molly to have that opportunity. She deserves it. My heart aches for that kid. Basketball is so important to her, and to have this happen to her -- honestly, we thought she was going to be back. We thought she was going to be back a couple weeks ago.

For her to be able to stay, not bring any added attention to herself, like, oh, woe is me, it's amazing how she's handled this. I know how much it's hurting her.

I would love to get her on the floor for a couple seconds.

Hannah, let's keep riding that high. She knows she can do

it now. Every challenge gets bigger. Look at the challenges she's had already in this tournament. Hannah has grown up throughout this tournament, and she's going to have an unbelievable challenge tomorrow.

We're going to keep pouring into her. We're going to keep telling her that we believe in her. If a mistake happens, we're going to live with that, we're going to live with that because nobody's been able to stop Kamilla Cardoso. That's been a near impossible task.

Q. A question about Vivian Stringer. What's the origin of your relationship, and how has it evolved over time? Have you heard from her over the past couple of weeks as you guys have gone on this run?

LISA BLUDER: I have not heard from Coach Stringer in the last couple of weeks. Hoping to hear from her at the end of the year. The last time I got to talk to her was at Rutgers, and Naismith honored her with a lifetime achievement to women's basketball. And I got to spend some good time with her there.

I consider Coach Stringer a mentor, somebody that when I was first starting coaching in the early '80s, I would work her basketball camps just to be able to spend some time around her, just to be in her presence really and to learn from her.

You remember the goofiest things. I remember after a camp session, her driving me home in her car back to my dorm, when I was staying in a dorm back then with the other campers.

Then I would sneak over to her practices. We were only 50 minutes away, so it was easy for me to sneak into Carver-Hawkeye Arena and watch her practice.

Coach Stringer is a low talker, and that made it really hard sometimes.

I have so much respect for Coach Stringer. And I'm so -- Christine Grant hired both of us. We have that connection. I really value her and her opinion and the work that she did to establish this program.

Q. Kind of jump off of that, to be able to make history tomorrow, with Dr. Grant and with Coach Stringer and with essentially over a century of women's basketball in Iowa in the making, could you just kind of take me through how it feels to be the caretaker of that legacy. And if you'd allow yourself to think about this as a founding achievement for you guys.

LISA BLUDER: I don't know if I'd consider myself the

caretaker because there's so many people involved in Iowa basketball, and we have so many good programs in our state that are so good.

But definitely being from the University of Iowa, you think about things a little bit differently because of Dr. Grant's legacy, because of her involvement in gender equity, Title IX, her push for women's athletics over and over again, putting herself out there. She taught all of us at Iowa how to be a little bit different in the way we think, the way that we go into a room and the way that we watch and the way that we think.

I never want to forget those lessons she taught me. And I'm hoping, I'm hoping that I'm passing those lessons onto the women that I get to coach now because that's how that's passed along, right, that legacy, and that's important.

Q. Tomorrow will be the 139th game that Kate and Caitlin have played side by side. First question is what has that done for your program to have that kind of consistency? And what do you want Iowa fans to remember about Kate and what she did?

LISA BLUDER: I think the consistency speaks for itself and what we were doing last year and how many games that those five women started together. I can't remember the exact number, but it was significant in that we got to this level last year.

And then to do it again this year with, again, not all the same pieces but a lot of the same pieces, a lot of the key same pieces.

Right now everybody's so eager to jump with the transfer portal, you look at a Syd, that's a prime example. Syd has had great comments about people had talked to her about leaving, but she recognized the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. And she believed in staying the course.

She is a great example of why to stay with a program. If you're being motivated, if you're growing your game, wait your time, and it will be there, and it will be more fulfilling when you're there with the people that helped build it with you.

Kate Martin, people are going to remember her as this tough kid that's got grit, is a leader. I've termed her as the glue of our team so much. She's going to be an unbelievable coach.

She is a tremendous leader of young women. She is able to hold people accountable when it is not easy to hold your teammates accountable when you're 20 years old. And

she doesn't back down to that. She is not scared of doing that. She has the respect of everybody in the room, so she's able to do that.

Kate Martin's legacy will go down as one of the best leaders ever.

Q. You brought up fatigue when you were talking about going to the WNBA, which kind of brings me to this. It's been a long season. You were playing almost six months ago at Kinnick. You haven't been home for two weeks or whatever. You played a 9:30 game last night. I don't know what time you got to bed. How, through this run -- how, through this two- or three-day stretch do you balance preparation and rest?

LISA BLUDER: I think it's really important, and it's one of the things I learned last year, I feel from this experience, is that scouting reports are really good to look at and to read and memorize at this point, but not so much to go on the floor with.

Legs are really, really important, especially when you're going against a South Carolina team that is so deep. You don't have the advantage of wearing people down. So rest is crucial.

You're right, our season's been even longer because we actually did a 12-day trip overseas.

But I think when you really like the people you're around, it's a lot easier. If you don't like the people you're having lunch with every day and spending time with every day, it can be a grind. But when you enjoy it, when you want to be together -- we're not sick of each other yet. We're really not.

Q. Coach, if I could ask you two different things. One is the vocal leadership Caitlin has shown this year. I know that was a big thing for her to do. Second, just your thoughts on what Dawn has built over the course of her career, how hard it is to sort of maintain that level of excellence and your thoughts on that.

LISA BLUDER: Caitlin, I think that is another area of her growth. It was managing her emotions and then being able to communicate with her teammates in the correct way. She has learned that.

Before, it was like all fire and no love. And now she understands that you can give some fire if you've invested enough in the love part. So she's learned that this year and has done a much, much better job with that.

I mean, Coach Staley, this is amazing. This may be the

best women's basketball team we've seen. I think you could say that. They have all the parts. She's a tremendous recruiter, tremendous motivator, a tremendous example. Now she's our Olympic coach.

Yeah, what she has done -- again, she's the one that keeps -- she's setting the bar. For a while it was Pat, then it was Geno. And now it's Dawn setting the bar for everyone else. You have to have someone set the bar, and she's doing it.

Q. I've noticed before games your players come out onto the court smiling, even laughing with each other sometimes. During the games they don't seem to get particularly stressed even in tough spots. Besides experience, from where does that come?

LISA BLUDER: Trust. In my opinion -- I mean, you can't go into anything that's hard unless you trust the people around you. And we have built trust. And we're going to have to have an amazing amount tomorrow to step off that ledge because it's a big one.

But I do believe that it really comes down to something so simple as I trust the person to the left and to the right of me, and I know they're going to do their job to the best of their ability.

Q. Over your career you've kind of established a foundation of how you want to play, but depending on who's on the floor is how strategically you try to play them, whether it's Megan Gustafson in the post or Caitlin Clark or many others who have been great over the years. How has that adapted this year specifically when you seem to start out with a more traditional 5 and Hannah at the 4. And then about three to four weeks into the season you decided to go more with a four-guard lineup and Hannah at the 5. What led you to that decision? And how has Hannah been able to grow and evolve to the point where she can play that and even head up against the great posts in the game?

LISA BLUDER: I think everybody goes into the season with kind of a game plan, right? You go into a game with a game plan, and you think this is what's going to be best. But you've got to make adjustments along the way. If it's going astride, if it's not going as well as you think, you've got to change things.

So my goal is always to have the best five players on the floor, right? I mean, it sounds so simple -- not positionally the five best players, but the five best players. I don't care if you're a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. I don't give them numbers like that. I just want the best players on the floor. And in my opinion, this was our best five players.

Hannah had to adjust from something she wanted to be, which is that power forward, to something we needed her to be, and that was the center.

So there was a few growing pains in that, but she's obviously adapted very, very well to that and now is embracing it. It took a while for her to embrace it, but now she is.

Q. What would it mean for the University of Iowa and the state of Iowa to get one more win tomorrow? And the second part is this has got to be the storybook game that everyone wanted to see with the team that's undefeated versus the team that has a generational player, rematch of last year's Final Four, with all the record ratings and attendance. This has got to be cool that the teams everybody wants to see are playing for a title tomorrow.

LISA BLUDER: I keep feeling like we're playing in games everybody wanted to see, the LSU game, the UConn game, and now the South Carolina game. We've been tested for sure. We're battle tested.

It would mean a lot to our program because it's never happened before. So obviously that's for Iowa. But for those five seniors, and especially for Caitlin, to be able to go out like that would be just an unbelievable accomplishment. Also, we love our fans. We would love to bring that home to the state of Iowa.

Last year I felt like we gave so much joy. Even through losing, we gave so much joy to the people of Iowa and really to people across the country, according to the letters and e-mails that I got. I want to do that again. But I could do it with a W too.

Q. When Hannah was up there last night, I was thinking about after she scored 47 against Penn State, someone asked her what was it like to have the crowd chant your name. And she said it made me feel special. And you turned to her and said, you are special. It was a really genuine moment. It made me wonder, we've talked so much about Caitlin's legacy, but what do you think about her legacy in terms of being able to infuse, not just her younger teammates, but women all over with confidence?

LISA BLUDER: I genuinely believe every time that Caitlin breaks a record or comes off a game, there are thousands of boys and girls out shooting and wanting to be 22, thousands. I mean, she has inspired that next generation of kids. There's absolutely no doubt.

Now, hopefully they won't start with logo 3s. Hopefully they'll start with something a little bit closer. But she has been a motivator for so many people.

Hannah Stuelke is special. All my women are special honestly. I just love that kid. She's somebody you just want to hug. You just want to hug that kid.

Q. There's been so much talk about more investment coming into women's sports, and the NCAA has made some changes over the past couple of years, finally allowing March Madness logo to be used, expanding the field. What else would you like to see from the NCAA to take this sport to the next level?

LISA BLUDER: I think that officiating is a topic that's always talked about. So I think we need to invest in some younger officials coming along and learning the game and having the courage to get into this game because it is not easy. I don't know how you could find anybody to be an official, to be quite honest. It is a horrible job.

So I think we need to really work on that. I think that's an important part of our game.

Sometimes I feel like we worry so much about the sportsmanship aspect, which is important and every coach should want that for their program, but it shouldn't be the ultimate focus. That's what I hear sometimes is that's the number one thing we're going to talk about in our officials is the sportsmanship. Let's talk about calling a screen. Let's talk about calling a charge. You know what I mean?

I think that's an element. I know we're going to get units coming up here pretty soon. That can't come soon enough. Why are we waiting to put that in? Let's do it now. Why wait? I think change has to happen a little bit quicker than what -- they want to move.

But they're listening now, and that's a good start, right? They're listening, and they're understanding there is a value to women's basketball. And that's a good start.

Q. We in the media make a big deal about Caitlin Clark's last stance, and we and the rest of the world will remember her as this game-changing player, all the buzzer beaters. But how will you and your locker room remember Caitlin Clark? If you'd like, you can also apply that question to the rest of your senior class.

LISA BLUDER: We talk about Caitlin so much, but she only has one locker. She's just one part of our team. Certainly her legacy, we've talked about it a ton. She set record after record after record.

But one of our values is everyone matters, so all five of those starters -- Sharon Goodman was in the starting lineup this summer. She doesn't get off the bench right now. She matters. She matters a lot.

All of our seniors, Kate and Gabbie, what they've done in their roles, Molly, everyone has been instrumental.

So we all love Caitlin to death, everyone loves her, but she's only got one locker. It's not like she's got a palace in there.

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