

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

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Lisa Bluder

Caitlin Clark

Kate Martin

Finals Postgame Media Conference

South Carolina - 87, Iowa - 75

THE MODERATOR: Good evening and welcome to the NCAA women's Final Four press conference. Joining us on stage are the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Coach, if you'd like to provide a brief opening statement.

LISA BLUDER: Just want to congratulate South Carolina. That is a tremendous basketball team. Coach Staley obviously, congratulations to them.

I'm proud of my team, though. Finishing national runner-up two years in a row is an amazing feat. Nobody thought we were going to be here at the beginning of the year, so that makes it pretty special.

Always saying good-bye to your seniors is really, really tough. And every time you see a season end it's another chapter closed, and that's tough. But I know we're going to look back on this and be very, very proud of the effort we gave this year.

Q. Caitlin, I'm sure the moment stings quite a bit, but Dawn Staley just gave you some really, really strong and sincere praise on the podium, on the TV broadcast, for all you've done and all that she believes you're about to do in the years to come. I wonder what that means to hear from her.

CAITLIN CLARK: I think any time someone like Coach Staley is able to recognize you and what you did for the game is obviously pretty special. Obviously she's someone I respect so much. I respect what she's done for



South Carolina. I respect what she did as a player for our game.

Any time you can get the praises of her is pretty special. So it means a lot.

Q. Caitlin, you said that you've not wanted to look beyond this game or whatever was next in front of you. Now what are the emotions, and what do you think going forward? Do you think about everything that you were able to do, especially this past season?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, it's certainly been a special year. To be honest, after last year I was kind of, like, how do we top doing what we did last year? Somehow, some way, every single person in our locker room believed. To be honest, this year was probably more special than last year.

The teams we had to go through to get to this point, we won the Big Ten Tournament. We lost two players that were three-year starters for our program, and to be back in this position and come out here and battle -- I mean, South Carolina is so good. There's only so much you can do.

Cardoso has 17 rebounds. They have 51 as a team. We have 29. Hard to win a basketball game like that. You've basically got to shoot perfect at that point.

I'm just proud of our group. We never backed down, and we gave it everything we've got.

For me, just the emotions will probably hit me over the next couple days. I don't have much time to sit around and sulk and be upset. I don't think that's what I'm about either.

Yeah, I'm sad we lost this game, but I'm also so proud of myself, I'm so proud of my teammates, I'm so proud of this program. There's a lot to be proud of.

But there's going to be tears. It is sad this is all over, and this is the last time I'm going to put on an Iowa jersey.

I think just reflecting back and soaking in everything that I was able to do because basically anybody other than me and Coach Bluder never thought this was possible.



Q. Caitlin, have you allowed yourself to be excited about what's next, or have you been too focused on finishing your career here?

CAITLIN CLARK: I've been 110 percent focused on finishing my career here. That's been my full focus. That's been my driving force, and I think that's what's allowed me to play such great basketball through the month of March and April and through the end of our season, but really all year long.

It was never the decision of whether I was going pro or whether I was staying at Iowa, never was something I stressed on too much. I knew it was something that would become clear to me over time.

I think for me I know what's next is soon. But at the same time, I'm not blind to the fact that I need to enjoy this, I need to soak this in and enjoy these last few moments with my teammates because these are some of my best friends. They'll be my best friends for the rest of my life, and that's what matters to me the most.

Q. Caitlin, you've done a lot for the Big Ten. The Big Ten gets maligned a lot, but you guys did a lot for the Big Ten. I'm sure you're disappointed, but when you have a chance to look at the impact you've made, where the ratings are through the roof and most of it's because of you, and then of course the Iowa team once again being in this position two years in a row. What will you look back at this time frame despite the not winning the championship?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think the biggest thing is it's really hard to win these things. I think I probably know that better than most people by now. To be so close twice, it definitely hurts, but at the same time, we were right there. We battled. We took down some really great teams to get back to this point. It's something that's really hard to do.

When I think about women's basketball going forward, obviously it's just going to continue to grow, whether it's at the WNBA level, whether it's at the college level. Everybody sees it. Everybody knows. Everybody sees the viewership numbers.

When you're given an opportunity, women's sports just kind of thrives. I think that's been the coolest thing for me on this journey, we started our season playing in front of 55,000 people in Kinnick Stadium. And now we're ending it playing in probably 15 million people or more on TV. It just continues to get better and better and better. That's never going to stop.

When you continue to give them the platform, things like this are just going to continue to happen.

Q. Caitlin, what you and your team have accomplished in Iowa has made the whole world look at women's sports and women's basketball. How do you think all of women's sports can capitalize on this momentum right now?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think the biggest thing is, for us, this team came along at a really good time, whether it was social media, whether it was NIL, whether it was our games being nationally televised. We've played on Fox, NBC, CBS, ESPN -- you go down the list, and we've been on every national television channel. I think that's been one of the biggest things that has helped us.

I think, no matter what sport it is, give them the same opportunities, believe in them the same, invest in them the same, and things are really going to thrive.

You see it with other sports, and I'm a big fan of other sports. Like I try to support as much as I can, and I think that's the biggest thing is continue to invest your time, money and resources there, and continue to show up for those people and give them the opportunities.

I think that's what's going to help drive women's sports forward in the future.

Q. This is for all three of you. What do you think the legacy of this team and this era is for Iowa basketball? And what's probably the moment that stands out? Is it something on the floor? Is it something just among all of you? I guess what can you share?

KATE MARTIN: I don't know if you can really describe and put it into words this legacy. Honestly, I just hope we've brought a lot of people joy and we've brought a lot of people together.

I hear all the time about how many friends people have made in the stands just watching our games. We sold out every single home game this year at Carver. And everywhere we go, we have fans lining up wanting Caitlin's autograph, our autograph. More than anything, our legacy is what we've brought to the state of Iowa, I think, and all the joy and the fun.

It's pretty cool to be coached by Coach Bluder and the culture she's built at Iowa. I think just watching us, you can see the joy that we have. I think that's the main thing for our legacy.

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I would agree. I think this group



has gone about it in the right way in every single thing that we've done in every phase of our life. I think that's what you can be the most proud of.

We truly have each other's back. Maybe we weren't always the most skilled. Maybe we weren't always the tallest. Maybe we weren't always the fastest, but we just believed. We knew we could be in these moments. We trusted one another. That took a couple of years to get to that point.

There's been so many great Iowa women's basketball players to come before us and allow this program to be really, really good when Kate and I and everyone else stepped on campus. And I feel like we took it to a whole nother level. I feel like our program is in good hands moving forward.

I think more than anything people will probably remember our two Final Fours and things like that. But people aren't going to remember every single win or every single loss. I think they're just going to remember the moments that they shared at one of our games or watching on TV or how excited their young daughter or son got about watching women's basketball. I think that's pretty cool.

Those are the things that mean the most to me when people come up to me and -- I don't really get offended when people say I never watched women's basketball before. I think, one, you're a little late to the party, yes. But, two, that's cool. We're changing the game. We're attracting more people to it.

But at the same time, those little things are, I think, the moments that we'll remember forever.

Q. Caitlin, this was a game of runs. Your guys' start was amazing, right? Right before the end of the half, they hit you with a 5-0 and then they start with a 6-0 at the start of the third quarter. Is that where the game changed hands and they took control?

CAITLIN CLARK: They're a really good team. We knew they were going to go on runs. By no means, when we started off as hot as we did, did we think we'd be able to hold that lead. That's just what teams do.

There's some crazy statistics where South Carolina just outscores everybody in the second half by a ton of points every single game.

To me, I'm just proud of our resiliency. We go into the fourth quarter, I think we cut it to five. And we just weren't able to come up with a few stops and a few baskets.

That speaks to our team. That's the story it's been all year long. My whole entire career, we never give up. We just keep fighting.

Their runs are kind of daggers, especially when they keep making pull-up jump shots. That's what we are going to give up. Sometimes you live with that and you're going to live with them out-rebounding you. There's only so much you can do for someone who's 6'7. Hannah was doing her best to box her out. She's a really great player, going to be a really great pro.

Q. I want to ask a variation on questions that have been asked. We've talked about this being a transformative year in terms of women's college basketball. And I just wondered for the two of you personally, what does it mean to be a part of that, to have your name associated with that?

KATE MARTIN: I don't think I can fully grasp the whole entire concept of being a part of that right now. I think once I'm older and I can reflect back on this time, I think I'll appreciate it way more.

Just like we've said before, seeing little girls and little boys look up to us, want our autograph, enjoy watching women's basketball, that is just something so cool and so special.

I idolized Iowa women's basketball, but it wasn't like it is now. It's just super cool to be a part of that. I think forever we'll be known, like I said, our legacy as a team that's really kind of changed women's basketball in a sense. I mean, there's other teams too.

But it's just really cool to be associated with that, and I feel super grateful.

CAITLIN CLARK: I would say the same. I think there's obviously so many amazing people that have come before us and give us this opportunity. I think, to attract so many people to watching women's basketball is so special. And the way people have showed up consistently throughout my career, I was going through some old pictures last night and just how things have changed since my freshman year and my sophomore year, it was so incredible. Time goes so fast. It's crazy.

I can't believe this is my last career game. There's just so much to be proud of.

I think people didn't love us for our wins. I think they loved us for the way we carried ourselves every single day, for the way we played for one another, the joy we played with, the passion we played with, the competitive spirit we had, the way we high-fived and celebrated our teammates'

success. That's the reason people loved turning on Iowa women's basketball.

Q. You've had an incredible journey to this point, especially with the historical viewership. What would you say to kids striving to be you right now?

CAITLIN CLARK: I would say I think the biggest thing is this is what I kind of said about my entire career is nobody really believed other than myself. I think confidence. I think as a young girl, just have confidence, a young boy, have confidence in yourself and confidence in whatever you want to be.

I think that was the thing that my parents instilled in me from a young age. They never told me no. They told me no about other things, but not in what I wanted to do and what I wanted to be and the goals I wanted to chase after.

I would say that's the biggest thing. You've got to say it. You've got to work for it. You've got to earn it. You don't ever want anything to be given to you.

That's what I'm most proud of throughout my career, I've worked really hard to be in this moment. That's where my confidence comes from. That's the piece of advice I would give to the younger generation.

KATE MARTIN: Very well said. I used to sleep with an Iowa women's basketball poster on my ceiling. So to be in this position and be with Coach Bluder and make it to back-to-back national championships, I just feel super grateful. It's because I worked really hard, and I dreamed big.

I'm not some All-American, five-star recruit out of high school. I never was. And people believed in me, I believed in myself, and here I am. So if I can do it, so can you.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Kate and Caitlin, and congratulations on a tremendous season.

Q. Congratulations on the season you had. Two parts to this. One, I went back and looked. Caitlin's freshman year, your first games were not even on (indiscernible) or cable TV. They had to be streamed. I hear a lot of people talk about this being a moment, you already hear people talk about Caitlin as a one-off, trying to talk about the audience that is involved here. What would you say to people who try to make this about just being one player as opposed to opportunity for the audience? Then second one is if you could talk about the way Caitlin's performance and time at Iowa is going to impact how you recruit going forward.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, it's interesting that those games were streamed. I think we were playing at, like, 3:00 in the afternoon during COVID and things like that. So really not giving anybody an opportunity to watch our games.

Caitlin has certainly been a tremendous star for our game, but there are so many stars in our game. We have, many, many. So we're just going to latch onto that next one next year.

And there's lots of them. There's not just one. Even this year, there were so many. That's what makes her getting the player of the year award so special because it wasn't a runaway. It was a really, really hard decision because there's so many good players out there.

I'm hoping with our success, I think success breeds success. Definitely I feel recruiting going forward. We've opened up our geographic footprint. And I think that's going to bode well for Iowa in the future.

Q. Now that her career is over, can you put it into words what it means and what it's going to mean going forward, not just for -- for her, for Iowa, for women's basketball, for all of it?

LISA BLUDER: She has raised the excitement of our sport. There's no doubt. Just because she does things in a different way than anybody else can do. Plus she has all the intangibles. She's a great student. She's a great role model. She does everything -- she loves being that role model.

I really think that, when she came in as a freshman and she said, we're going to the Final Four, a lot of people laughed at her and maybe even laughed at her for coming to Iowa, quite honestly.

But she believed, we believed, and she got everybody else in that locker room to believe. And that is not an easy thing to do.

So her just belief in everybody around her, it just grew and grew. You could say the same thing about this year, quite honestly.

I don't know if I answered your question completely, but I think that she has done amazing things to grow our game and doing it the right way.

Q. Being here in back-to-back years, especially with the expansion coming to the Big Ten next year, what's the importance, and what does this mean for the Big Ten as a conference?

LISA BLUDER: I hope it means a lot. I'm so proud to be a part of the Big Ten Conference. It's a great conference. We go against super competition every single night, great coaches, great athletes. And it prepares us for this. It prepares us for being on the biggest stage.

But I really go back to quite a long time ago when the Big Ten said we're going to put a network out there, and we're going to be a national sports network. I remember when Jim Delany came into the women's coaches room, and I was, like, what? What is he talking about?

Look what happened. We were the first ones out there. And then everyone had to follow suit to keep up. So I'm very, very proud to be a part of the Big Ten. And I think our leadership is really, really good with Megan Kahn, too.

Q. Everybody knows South Carolina, one of their biggest advantages is how deep they are, 37 bench points. The first quarter, Bree went out, and they put Raven -- how hard is it to game plan for so many different weapons and so many looks they can throw at Caitlin?

LISA BLUDER: That was a huge advantage because I think they played nine people in double figures. We had six. Just to have those extra fouls and extra legs. They didn't have to play too hard. Even the other night, they were resting people the other night.

One thing that we've always been able to do is really push the ball and really run. We did score pretty well. We scored 20 more points than other people do against South Carolina, so we did score pretty well.

But, yeah, to be able to have all those fresh legs on Caitlin was really tough.

And not only their depth, their height. I'm not just talking about their centers. They're really pretty big at every position, which makes it hard. They could recover really well when we had 3s.

Q. Lisa, I'm going to ask you a similar question to what I asked Caitlin, to know that Dawn praised Caitlin on the stage out there. With all that Dawn means to women's basketball, what does that mean for you, in terms of who Dawn is, and what does it mean to know that Caitlin is not done. She's going to continue to be a big deal and hopefully for many years to come in this profession?

LISA BLUDER: Obviously, Dawn Staley is the leader of women's basketball right now. She's our Olympic coach.

She is the person that we are all looking up to. And she's somebody that, when she says something like that to a player, it should make them feel really good.

I'm thrilled that she acknowledged Caitlin and her greatness, I really am. I think that Caitlin is going to continue to have this kind of impact in the WNBA. Indiana is doing well with their ticket sales. I know Las Vegas had to move to a different, bigger arena when Indiana comes to town. So those are all really good signs that women's basketball is in a good spot.

Q. Coach Bluder, what a journey with this team. I remember when you guys signed Caitlin Clark and nobody really knew who she was at that point. Just thinking about what you guys have all taught her and apparently how to be a more compassionate person, how to be a leader. It's true that growth goes both ways. You maybe never even had a group like this before. What has this group taught you, or in what ways have they made you think differently?

LISA BLUDER: Well, people did know about her. She was the fourth best player coming out of the country. People did know about her obviously. We really had to work hard to get her, to keep her in the state.

This group -- I really hope that I haven't changed a lot, to be quite honest. I changed in how I had to coach Caitlin because there was that line you had to walk between discipline and don't put out the fire. So there was that line.

But honestly I don't think I've changed as a person. The values that I have now are the values that I've always had. The things that we really try to build as a team with trust and caring for each other, I've always tried to coach that way.

Q. Congrats on a great season. I want to ask you about Hannah Stuelke. Very likely without her performance in the semifinals, you guys aren't here today. Can you just tell me how she's grown this season, and even in these last couple weeks, against the really tough assignments throughout the contest?

LISA BLUDER: Hannah Stuelke, first of all, was a power forward up until about the beginning of November. So she really has adapted to her position. She didn't really want to be a center, but we convinced her that she needed that. And if it was best for the team, she would do it.

She obviously has improved her game so much this year and used -- and everybody focused on she's not tall enough, she's not tall enough. You have other assets, right? You've got speed. You've got agility. Use those

assets. And she has done it.

Even though she wasn't playing the position she really desired and wanted to play, didn't matter. She came and gave it everything she could all day.

We talked about her growth as a young woman, as far as mentally and confidence-wise. And that gives me a lot of joy when I see my women just growing in that area of their lives because I know that's going to last forever.

Q. Coach, maybe a consolation scenario, but you lost to Coach Mulkey last year. Four titles for her. And you lose to Coach Staley this year. Three titles for her. What does that put you for the standard you may have reached knowing you did really well against these two coaches but just came up a little short?

LISA BLUDER: It kind of makes me a double loser right now, quite honestly. It's tough. But I know how hard it is to get here too. I say that tongue in cheek because I know it is really, really difficult to get to a Final Four. For us to be national runner-ups two years in a row, I'm never going to apologize.

So many people last year, oh, you'll do it next time, like it was terrible we didn't win the national championship. So many people said that to me. I'm like, darn, you guys, we're national runner-ups. That's pretty good too.

So I'm never going to apologize for finishing second in the country. But it sure would be nice to win one.

Q. How did it feel to coach these amazing girls?

LISA BLUDER: It's so empowering being around these women. I mean, to be around women that are driven every single day, that come to work positive and believing in themselves and each other, it is so empowering.

I wish everybody's workplace could be like mine is, and the world would be a whole lot better place.

But I think you are well on your way, Lily. I really do. I think you're going to be in that driver's seat real soon. You're amazing.

Q. Going off what this gentleman before had asked you, recruiting, fan base, national awareness, two years in a row national runner-up. It hurts now, but six months from now, what will you be able to take away from it, or how will you feel when you know that you went head to head and hung in the entire game with probably one of the best, if not the best team in the history of the sport?

LISA BLUDER: It's kind of hard to process right now. I pray that our team will still get the fan support even when Caitlin leaves. I mean, we have five seniors leaving.

So, yeah, we're going to be young. We're going to have some growing pains next year. But I hope that people respect the way that we play, the way that we do things, and they're going to want to support this young group of Hawkeyes next year, just as much as they have after the success we've had the last couple of years. So I just hope it maintains.

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