

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Indiana vs Utah

Thursday, March 20, 2025
Columbia, South Carolina, USA
Colonial Life Arena

Utah Utes

Coach Gavin Petersen

Gianna Kneepkens

Mayè Tourè

Media Conference

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, great to be here in Columbia, South Carolina. We are very excited to be participating in the NCAA tournament. Fourth year in a row for our program, so it's not lost on us in terms of sustaining that success and continuing to be in this great opportunity in the NCAA tournament.

It's not lost on us. We know there are a lot of good teams that aren't able to play right now in this tournament, so we're preparing, ready to go, and excited just to be here.

Q. For both of players, just achieving here, being here after what happened, after the coaching change so early in the season, it might have sunk some programs. It seems like you guys hung together and accomplished the goal you wanted.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, I would say definitely that's a hard thing just because it's a big change, but it was a very smooth transition. We all know Gavin very well, so very smooth transition. Couldn't have gone any better.

And I would say we're grateful to be here, but we don't want to just be okay with being here. We're going to compete every game and opportunity that we have.

So we're excited, but locked in and ready to go, too.

MAYÈ TOURÈ: Yeah, I would say it was pretty smooth, too. It was obviously like unexpected and it was a surprise to everybody, but we already knew Gavin, like she said, but also we are a player-led program, so just kept the same habits, working hard every day, and the same goals.



Grateful to be here, and we know we can have a good run here.

Q. Gianna, you're from Minnesota; South Carolina has Tessa Johnson. Do you know her at all from high school, anything like that?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I didn't know her personally, but obviously the basketball community is pretty small. I know of her. She's a great player. It's cool to see a bunch of Minnesota girls all over the country competing in the NCAA tournament. It's cool.

Q. Gianna, you played almost 900 minutes this season, and Mayé I believe 600. How have you maintained fatigue and staying in shape up to this point in the season?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, I think we have a great support staff. Our athletic trainer, CJ, is awesome and helps us stay recovered and stuff. With Lindsay, too, keeping us strong, knowing when to work us, how to work us.

We have a great support staff. Also taking accountability yourself, getting rest, eating right, drinking water. Just grateful to be feeling the way I do at this point in the season.

MAYÈ TOURÈ: Same thing. I would say we're monitoring every practice, every lift that we do, and we have a great system. And also CJ, we have her for after practice every day, so we just make sure our body stays ready. That is for March and we're ready now.

GAVIN PETERSEN: 900 minutes and she still gets mad at me when I pull her out.

Q. For both players, looking forward to a great game tomorrow against Indiana. What challenges do you see from that matchup?

MAYÈ TOURÈ: I think they're a very physical team overall. Obviously we watched them and know our focus and what



we're -- we have to do for the game.

So we to make sure we also stay focused on that and play Utah basketball and we'll be just fine.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, we know they're a great team. They can shoot the ball well. They move the ball well. So we know what's ahead of, us but we're prepared.

Q. For Mayé and Gianna, just being at the NCAA tournament for a number of years now, I guess is it an advantage to know what to expect, and what in your mindset -- what is the mindset heading in here in this latest NCAA tournament?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think it definitely helps to have some experience, just the confidence of having been in the situation before.

But every year brings something a little different. Other teams are different, your team is different. So staying ready and attacking and being aggressive is a mindset. The team that plays harder usually has a pretty good shot at winning.

MAYÈ TOURÈ: I would say I'm very grateful to have people with experience around me that have been here before. I've never been in March Madness. I feel like we're prepared and I trust all my teammates and the coaching staff. We're here and that's what we worked for.

Q. Coach, you switched the starting lineup two times this year I believe.

GAVIN PETERSEN: Uh-huh.

Q. How important has that consistency been down the stretch for you guys?

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, that's something we've done as long as I've been with Coach Lynne Roberts. That's something that has grown on me and I've adopted as well. You want to just try to find a groove, find a rhythm with the one thing remaining that those players are continuing to work hard, to buy into game plans, and get us off to good starts.

So when injuries happen, and in a basketball season it does, then you just have to adjust. But no one ever in our opinion get out of the starting lineup because of an injury. A lot of times that person gets put right back in and we pick up with where we left off.

It's very important because the synergy and the connectivity that those starters have to have is very

important, especially to get off to good starts.

Q. Sounds like the players said the transition was fairly smooth. I assume you knew quite a lot about all the players and the program. Got to be a sense of pride that this is a dramatic change and they stayed the course and achieved what they wanted to achieve?

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah 100% proud of each and every one of them. It's very humbling and gratifying to know that all the work that you were doing behind the scenes didn't go unnoticed. People were paying attention.

And these guys all know how much I care about them, not just on will basketball court but off the court as well. And that happens during the relationship building in the recruiting process and carries on through.

So extremely proud of them. I will reflect at the ends of year. We've done some really good things since that transition. It wasn't easy. It's been hard. It's been an adjustment period for everybody.

But I'm very fortunate and lucky to have people I can lean on, like our upperclassmen, senior class, which has left an impactful legacy at the University of Utah. Mayé, even though her short time with us, has made an immediate impact. Then you have Gianna and Matty as juniors.

There are so I guess reliable, so, again, I think I hit the lottery in that regard in terms of taking over a program where they were ready to go.

Just have to get out of their way and still to this day I still got get out of their way.

Q. I was just wondering more specifics on this transition as you stepped into head coach just not only for yourself but also the team, and what accomplishments you felt like personally stepping into that role.

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, you know, just in terms of reflecting, in terms of I wanted to be a head coach. I got into this profession because I love the game of basketball. I love working with the young student-athletes, impacting their lives in that impactful time of their lives.

It's something I've always want to achieve. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be taking over at the University of Utah. I thought I would have to go to a mid-major program and just learn and grow as a head coach there.

So this was not on the bingo card. Had no idea it was



coming. When it did, it was like, whoa, here we go. The blessing of it all was the fact that we had games coming up, a lot of games coming up in to the two-week period.

It really didn't give me time to mess up because all I focused on were these guys and game plans. So we kind of found our groove, got into a routine that way, and once we did, then I think everybody kind of settled into the new and we went from there.

But we've done some great things in terms of winning that first game against St. Joe's. I always go back to that. It was a whirlwind of a week. We notify our team on Tuesday, practice Wednesday, flying out to meet recruits on Wednesday, fly back. I think I beat the clock and got back home before midnight.

Practiced Thursday, press conference Friday, played Friday night. It was a whirlwind that week. I'll always remember it. And the looks on their faces at the press conference, at the game. I just knew that they were trying kind of sometimes trying too hard to really get me my first win as a head coach.

It's never been about me. It's been all about them. I'm so excited and thrilled to be able to lead them and still be able to accomplish what we set out to accomplish and reach the NCAA tournament.

Q. Indiana shoots 79% from the free-throw line. Are you changing up anything defensively to get them off the free-throw line? Obviously they're a physical team.

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, we do a pretty good job and we have done all season long of staying out of fall trouble, not fouling. Just something we stressed. We really want to be the only one shooting free throw. We want to shoot more free throws than our opponent makes.

It's like, well, we want to make sure we're very disciplined, we do our work early, and then free throws are a part of it. We just can't give them 27 free throws. If we can hold them to under 15, that's still just a small part of stopping them.

It's just we have our work cut out for us. I think we're prepared and dialed in.

Q. Gavin, Indiana seems like a team or program that's been a lot like Utah the last few years. Both been up and down, or mostly up among women's basketball teams. What kind of challenge is it to face a team that knows, like yourself, what it's like to be in the NCAA tournament?

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, you know, Teri and her coaching staff have done a phenomenal job over the last six, eight years. They've been really good. They've been hosting the first and second rounds at their place. We got to do that one year. They've multiple times.

So credit to them and their program and continuing to be in that upper part of the Big10. So hats off to them.

We're fired up just to be able to give that opportunity to play a team like this. Similar, it so should be a good game for viewers, people in attendance. Hopefully it's a good up-paced style of play, which I believe it's going to be.

And then three point shooting. Both teams have remarkable three point shooters, and I'm sure they're going to try to take away ours, as we are theirs. It's a chess match in that regard.

But like I said, I think our kids are prepared. Our main focus is our max effort and intensity. If we can sustain that for 40 minutes, the results are the results and we can be happy with that as long as we take care of the things we can control.

Q. How did you support Gianna as she was on the road to recovery after her injury?

GAVIN PETERSEN: Yeah, we actually talked quite a bit in terms of game planning. We had what we call G's Keys. So we would bother her before every game and she would text message us what she thought her insight was in terms of the opponents we were playing in the Pac-12.

She did that, so she got to really see the game as we see it and as we try to prepare our team. And even still to this day, she'll text message and be like, hey, can we watch some film, watch how I believe defenses are going to guard her.

That's a credit to her, her professionalism. She puts a lot of time into her game not only on the court but also on the mental side of things. I can say the same thing about Mayé Those are the two that probably bother -- that's not the right word -- they will text me to watch some film individually, and I love that.

They're students of the game. I think that's where Gianna has evolved the most. I think she sees the game from a coach's perspective, and that helps her be able to be as efficient as she is on the offensive end for us.

You guys never bother me.

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