

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Ole Miss vs Notre Dame

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South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Niele Ivey

Maddy Westbeld

Sonia Citron

Media Conference

Q. Sonia, I apologize for not knowing this but was yesterday the first time that you played with your knee totally exposed or has that happened along the way, obviously since the injury, and secondly, how is it feeling and if that was the first time, did it feel liberating?

SONIA CITRON: I actually think it was because when I stopped wearing my brace, I was still wearing the compression sleeve on it. So yesterday was the first day that I didn't have that sleeve or the brace on. And yeah, I mean, it's feeling great. Definitely feel like I'm back to my pre-injury self, so it's a good feeling.

MADDY WESTBELD: I think she was feeling pretty good.

Q. The two of you and Hannah have been described as the big three, which is such a common term in basketball now. Do you guys like that, dislike that, and how much do you guys really need to be a big six, given your depth issues going forward?

MADDY WESTBELD: I think it's huge for us to be a big six. People have been saying that. I think the important thing for one of the three of us is to set the tone early. I think that's kind of where we are at this point.

The three of us are kind of the leaders whether it's on the defensive end or on the offensive end. It's up to one of us to set the tone and that also includes AD and that also includes Nat, just for the first people who are out there. But yeah, I think the big six really what we need to lock in



on.

Q. You tied your career high in scoring yesterday, in an NCAA Tournament game no less. When you look back on yesterday, what's your main take away from it?

SONIA CITRON: I mean, I think I played aggressive. I played confident, and I think I'm just going to take those two things forward to the rest of the games that I play this season because I think that's just really important for not only me but the team when I'm playing like that. It helps everyone around me. So just keep playing aggressive and confident.

Q. Maddy, looks like you have your hands full with Madison Scott for Ole Miss tomorrow. Have you had a chance to watch video of her, and if you have, what strategy do you think you can best implement to try and neutralize her?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, she's a great player. The past like 16 hours, we've been doing a lot of film. Really just trying to be strategic. We had a good practice today. Really just trying to, like I said, be strategic with their team. They have a good offense. You know, she's a great player. Just try to play hard on her.

Q. When you look at the rest of Ole Miss and them collectively, what do you see? What stands out?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, they are a great team. They are really athletic. I think that's one thing that we just need to lock in on defensively, and also rebounding is a really big key for us to win. They crash the glass on every offensive possession and opportunity, so I think if we can win the rebounding battle, it will look good for us tomorrow.

Q. Going back to 2021, you've dealt with a lot of cancellations. Obviously after the COVID year, a lot of crazy things. What's it like to play in a tournament game like this one day after you had a win when you had not played a game like that in two weeks? What's the turnaround? What's it like today to try to get ready for that tomorrow?



MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I think you could kind of see the rust fall off a little bit yesterday. It's a good position for us trying to get back into everything. We had a couple great weeks of practice, just trying to prepare ourselves for what this tournament was going to bring, and I think today was a really good day of practice. We're really locked in. We're really focused on what we need to do tomorrow, and I think now, you know, we can settle in now and the anxiety is gone. All that is really gone, so we can really play our game tomorrow. I'm excited.

Q. We saw Olivia practicing a little bit yesterday. I just wondered if that's a regular thing, and how does she maybe elevate your preparation when she's participating?

SONIA CITRON: I mean, she definitely makes us better. I think no one wants to guard her, so when she is the player I have to guard, she definitely challenges me and challenges all of us. She's an amazing player. So when she's on the other side, it's definitely something that we all, I don't know, it just helps prepare us for like whoever we are playing.

MADDY WESTBELD: For sure. She's one of the best players in the country. Just having that to prepare against, we can prepare against anybody we've got to play against.

Q. For either or both of you, Nat Marshall is not accustomed to playing a lot of minutes, but she's played 34 and 33 the last two games and was really efficient offensively yesterday. Just the way she's inserted herself into this so smoothly, your take on how she's doing right now?

MADDY WESTBELD: Absolutely. She's really stepping into her role. Really, really proud of how she's, honestly, came out this whole year. She looks different and she's blossomed this year. So now she finally gets the opportunity to, you know, make that shine, and so I'm just really proud of her. You know, she's got more to show. So we need her toughness. We need her rebounding, all the little things that she does that people don't really notice. But yeah, she's been doing great for us.

Q. Following up on that earlier big three question. You two have both been here longer than Hannah. As the two veterans out of that trio, do you feel you have some sort of the responsibility to her to show her the ropes even more, even though she's been your scoring and steals leader, among other things, this year?

SONIA CITRON: Yes and no. Me and Maddy take it upon ourselves to bring the team together, especially during the

game. Just be that calmness and that -- just bring everyone together. But I think Hannah does a great job of not really -- she doesn't need to be led. She leads our team.

I don't think there's been a bunch of times where like we necessarily have to lead her, even though she is a freshman. She plays like she has a lot of experience. So I think it's more us just trying to bring the team together, being that we've been through this a bunch of times already.

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I agree with that. It's more so just a general leadership stance. Her, as well as anybody else, and us, two, also, just kind of bringing us together and making sure that we are okay, we're on the same page and never too high, never too low.

Q. Coach mentioned after the game, it was the most students' tickets that they had ever sold in the history of the program. As somebody who has been here coming out of COVID and these crowds starting building, what does it mean to you to have your fellow students, and do you get a sense on campus when you're at classes and stuff that people are jumping on the bandwagon?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, that's incredible. I didn't know that. Yeah, I think historically, we've had kind of an older demographic for our fan selection, which is great, and everybody is extremely loyal.

And it's amazing to hear that we have more students coming, and yeah, we do like walking around campus. I've noticed more students have been coming up to me, and noticing who I am, and just really excited about women's basketball in general. So it's really, really awesome to hear that.

Q. When an opponent's goal -- you know it's coming -- when an opponent's goal is to get physical, try and wear your team down, how do you counter that? What's the plan?

NIELE IVEY: Well, definitely just have to mix up some of our defenses. Go in a little bit of zone. Try and match their physicality. Just can't stay in one thing too long and just, you know, for tomorrow, I'm going to go see what works the best for them.

Q. Last year, you were eliminated in part because your last game, you got into some foul trouble, and then yesterday, you had three players with four fouls. Nobody fouled out but it was still foul trouble, and that seems to have been kind of a trend lately. As the

competition gets tougher into this tournament, what steps are you taking to that address that?

NIELE IVEY: Definitely I'm always talking and addressing the importance of defending without fouling, and we have been in this situation before, like you mentioned. So some of it is just learning and adjusting and pivoting when you're in the moment in the game.

And yesterday, hopefully we learned our lesson. You know, there were a couple fouls that we had off of screening fouls, things that we can clean up, some touch fouls, not being disciplined. We talked about those things last night and today, and so hopefully we adjust tomorrow.

Q. Last year, you beat Mississippi State to get out of the second round. Is it lost on you that for the second straight year, you're playing a Mississippi-based team in the SEC in the second round?

NIELE IVEY: I mean, coincidence, I guess. Luckily we've had a bunch of experiences this season playing against two SEC teams in South Carolina and Tennessee, and then playing a very similar style in N.C. State and Louisville. So going to draw upon those experiences playing a team like Ole Miss.

Q. Nat Marshall has not played a lot of minutes her whole career, and then she ends up playing I think 33 and 34 in the bigger state games you've had. She seemed really efficient yesterday on the offensive end. How has she come along so quickly in these games and looked so comfortable, if that's how you feel about it?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I'm super proud of Nat. She's basically stepping up to the challenge, and she rose to the occasion without having Kylee. She understands the moment as far as just being part of this program, and watching us go to Sweet 16 the past couple seasons. So she's just maximizing her opportunity, and I'm really honestly really proud of her. And she's come in and she's done really, really well the past two games, and I'm really pleased with her effort and her performance.

Q. Hannah said yesterday that maybe some of those touch fouls and some of the things that are uncharacteristic of your team could be attributed to, I think it was a 13-day layoff that you had.

NIELE IVEY: Of course she said that.

Q. Well, that's not all she said?

NIELE IVEY: I'm kidding. (Laughter).

Q. Curious how good it was just to get back on the court and maybe get some of those things out of the way and start getting back to your brand of basketball?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, she's right. We haven't played in 13 days, you definitely have to get the rust off, and it was time that they needed off. We got a lot of great recovery, and you know, I feel like we adjusted. It took a minute but it definitely is one of those games where you can tell we have not played in a while.

So very grateful to have moved on and we're in the round of 32 and hopefully tomorrow we come out 40 minutes and play a little bit more disciplined and not to have those touch fouls like we had yesterday.

Q. Coach Yo has put Ole Miss on the map, and they beat Stanford in the NCAA Tournament last year. Obviously you don't have time to study them often, but just your impressions of the program that she's building and to have them on this stage competing with y'all?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, absolutely. She's such a great rising star. She's, of course, beating Stanford last year, I watched that game. Bringing her program to the Sweet 16 was massive for her program and her era. She is doing a phenomenal job. And they play for her, they play hard, great athletes, but also have a lot of balance defensively and offensively, have a lot of weapons.

So hats off to her for what she's doing, and again, tomorrow, I'm excited for the matchup and looking forward to another ACC/SEC battle.

Q. I asked the players about this. We have seen Olivia practicing with you guys the other day, and pretty intense when we were there. I'm just wondering, what do you feel like she gives your team in terms of preparing you guys and her leadership and those kind of things?

NIELE IVEY: Right. She gives so much. She's worked so hard to get in this position as far as almost a year from her surgery and she's playing at a high level. She's in great shape. She's really strong, really confident in her knee.

And she comes in there -- outside of her play, ^ which is just elite. Her play is elite when she's on the floor. She just brings a level of competitiveness and experience that really helps our team just preparing for other matchups, but also just the things that she does when she's running the offense. You know, like you can learn a lot from her when



you're watching her and competing against her.

I'm really proud of her to see where she's at at this point. It's going to be, like I mentioned before, she's going to be fantastic next season, but especially watching somebody come back from injury, it's always really amazing to watch her back on the floor with the team in a jersey playing and doing what she loves.

Q. My other question is, I asked Coach Yo about this. We have seen all season the profile of women's basketball take a huge leap this year. From your standpoint, what's driving that?

NIELE IVEY: I think our style of play. The programs, the players, you have such elite talent. You have generational talents all across the board. Our senior-led players, as in Caitlin Clark, the big household name players, but then you also have a lot of rising stars. You have elite freshmen. The style of play is just amazing, and I think we have fed off the momentum of last year, last year's Final Four, and it has started from the beginning. Our game is hot, I know everybody understands that, but it's the way we are playing. We're playing at a high level. Every game is just an incredible matchup, incredible performances, record-breaking performances. So it's just really fun, great basketball, and I'm really proud to be a part of this.

Q. If an opponent over-focuses on Hannah, how does your team make them pay for that?

NIELE IVEY: Well, luckily I have a lot of balance on this team. Hannah draws a lot of attention, and Sonia had a career high yesterday. She can run the point for me. KK can run the point for me. We have a lot of versatility within our offense, and I think that's what makes us very special because we have a lot of players that can score at three levels.

So Hannah does draw a lot of attention, but I love that we have guards that can also handle the ball and also can get us in the offense and score.

Q. Since it came up, I just want to clarify something. How long in your mind has Olivia been full-tilt now, and does it at all whet her or your appetite for wishing maybe she was playing?

NIELE IVEY: Of course. I would love for her to be running the team and be on the floor. I mean, it's been multiple months, so I'm not sure exactly, maybe four. I'm not sure exactly the time of when she -- it was the progression of her transitioning back on the court. It was one-on-one, two-on-two, three-on-three, four-on-four, five-on-five. So maybe a couple months that she's been live five-on-five.

When I see her on the court, honestly it warms my heart and brings a smile to my face because like I said, she worked really hard to get in this position and to get back to be in great shape, to be feeling good, feeling confident, and I'm looking forward to her being actually back on the floor with us.

Q. While we are on the subject, how hard would it have been to implement her into the lineup when you have Hannah doing what she's doing as the team's point guard, just from a coaching perspective, would that have been a smart move, a difficult move? Just how would you see, if she were to have come back in the last one or two months?

NIELE IVEY: I think it's a positive. I think she's so dynamic, and I think Hannah and Liv playing together is going to be something special for college basketball. So it wouldn't be a problem at all. I mean, Liv, she knows my system. She knows exactly what I'm looking for. She knows how to run a team. She knows how to score, so not a problem at all, and I'm excited for them to be together.

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