

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

Monday, March 25, 2024

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Niele Ivey

Hannah Hidalgo

Maddy Westbeld

Media Conference

Notre Dame 71, Ole Miss 56

NIELE IVEY: Well, this one is really, really special. Obviously going to the Sweet 16 with this group, this is a special group, so all glory to God, number one. We've been through a lot. We've been through a lot this season. We've had a lot of highs and lows, a lot of adversity, and to see this group just find a way to come together to persevere through all of our adversity is something special.

I'm so grateful to be a part of this. So thankful for the fans. So thankful it was a 2:00, and we still had an amazing crowd. The last six weeks have just been magical with this group. The way that we're coming together, being able to accomplish going back to the third consecutive Sweet 16, which is not easy, is just phenomenal. I'm so grateful, so blessed, and again, the big three, they really showed out today. We had Maddy Westbeld led us 20 points Hannah with 19, 7 for 9 on the free throw line, and Sonia a double-double, 17 points, 10 rebounds, and the last game 29 points with a career high.

Credit to everybody on the team. Our zone was fantastic. Nat played with such poise. Her presence was amazing. KK, AD, everyone contributed, everyone got in the game, and it was just awesome. I was just so grateful, like I said. Thank you, Irish fans, thank you, South Bend, for really showing up for us and showing up for women's basketball. Excited to dance, excited to go to Albany, and again, super grateful.

Q. Maddy, the other day you kind of mentioned in passing about the team meeting after the NC State loss and now it's 10 straight wins. Now I'm really curious,



what were the magic words in that team meeting that you said? And what did you say to your team today before you took the floor?

MADISON SCOTT we just needed to make sure we were all on the same page. We know what this name on our chest means, and I think we just needed like a reminder of what that was.

It's grit, it's toughness. It's the little things that we need to do, and it started with practice. It was just everybody being a little bit tougher in practice and just setting the tone, and I think we all just got on the same page since then. It took everybody from top to bottom.

Before this game, I think it was just kind of same thing, lock into what we have and keep each other accountable, especially on the defensive end, so I think we did that to start the game.

Q. Hannah, Coach McPhee-McCuin said there's something about Hannah that it's not something you teach, it's what's inside of her. I wonder, what is that drive that's inside of you? Can you describe it? What makes you so relentless?

HANNAH HIDALGO: What pushes me? Jesus Christ. Everything I do is to give glory to God. I go out and that's kind of what my fight is for. Obviously of course my family, too, but I fight for Christ, and that's the way I'm able to give my testimony is through basketball.

I feel there's so much fire in this because God has given me the ability to do so, so that's what I go out and do.

Q. Hannah, can you talk about how you were able to set that tone right away and how important it was to be that aggressive?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah. I was just locked into the scout. I think we all were. We came out with this mentality that we were going to go on a 10-0 run, and we were just going to stop them from the jump. We knew that we needed to hit them before they kind of hit us because they're a great team and they're really athletic, so we were



all just locked into the scout and everyone was locked in on defense, so I was able to be more aggressive.

Q. Hannah, you've talked more than once this season, and you just mentioned it again, how important your faith in God is to being a basketball player and how important your trust in God is. How much more important does that become as you get deeper and deeper into this tournament?

HANNAH HIDALGO: You know, especially when it's getting -- when it's win or go home and we're getting so far in the tournament. It's just having faith. Just putting our trust in God even when all odds are against us with our injuries and being in foul trouble and not having so many players. Just having complete trust in God, and that's really all we can do, just give it our all and trust in Christ.

Q. Maddy, you did a pretty good job on Madison Scott today, so now as you look ahead to Oregon State, they've got a pretty good big in Raegan Beers. What do you expect trying to stop her?

MADDY WESTBELD: You know, we were kind of locked into Ole Miss, so we haven't really watched the film yet. But I've been watching them during March Madness, and they look like a good team. Just like anybody, they're going to be really tough, so we just have to trust in our scout, trust in our coaches to lead us there and just compete.

Q. Maddy, you referenced a moment ago the team meeting and the grit and what it means for the name on the jersey. Hannah today only had one rebound and it was an offensive and then she took it and scored. How much does she embody the grit and did you notice that at the time and do you guys feed off her energy?

MADDY WESTBELD: I think we noticed it when she first came in in the summer. She is just fire. She's an incredible player, just an incredible presence on the floor, and it starts with her defense.

Obviously we feed off of that. I tell her all the time, like we feed off of you whenever you start. She's unguardable. She's untouchable. She's just a different player.

Q. Maddy, you talked about the big three yesterday, and obviously you guys went off again today. Going off of that last question, what Anna does, and then there was a bucket that Nat hit that kind of looked like it defeated the opposition in the first half. I think it put you guys up by 19, and that was the moment, it was like, okay, this is what it's going to be. How important

are those little plays that Anna makes, that Nat makes, that kind of complement what you guys do as the big three?

MADDY WESTBELD: Absolutely. Like I said, it starts with one of us setting the tone. But I think Nat, AD, KK coming in, Becky, I think everybody just feeds off of that. When they see that we are locked in and we are focused, we're there to play, we're there to compete, I think everybody just -- they come to play, too. They set the tone, too. Nat I think had the first bucket of the game. It comes from all of us.

Q. Hannah, nine free throw attempts for you, six for Sonia. You talked about the aggression, but how much better do you think you are when you're getting to the bucket and you're not only getting to the free-throw line but knocking down your free throws, as with?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, that's big when we're able to be that aggressive. It just makes us so much harder to guard because when we're driving, the defense has to start collapsing and now we have shooters out on the corners, on the wings, that are able to knock down those shots, and we've been doing a great job of knocking those threes down, so it was matter of continuing to be aggressive and drawing the contact. Of course free throws can determine a game, so it's just getting there and making sure we're knocking them down.

Q. Maddy, you and Nat had a lot of success on that low post trap today, especially on the baseline. Was that something you were expecting to see a lot and have to defend a lot, and what do you make of your ability to keep on forcing mistakes by Ole Miss in that specific situation?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I think that's just trusting in our defensive tendencies. We knew that they were a driving team. I think that's why we went zone a lot, and we knew they were going to try and drive it, try and force baseline and force them into that trap. Yeah, we kind of premeditated that. We knew they were going to do it, and Nat was there every time as I led her into it, so it was really good.

Q. Hannah, I'm curious to know your thoughts on your two-game debut in this tournament freshman year. How do you evaluate your performance?

HANNAH HIDALGO: I don't know. I don't really evaluate myself. Everyone else can kind of evaluate it, but I think I'm doing a pretty decent job especially just coming in as a freshman and kind of leading such a phenomenal team.

Obviously the energy from the fans is just different, so it's nothing like I ever expected. Obviously coming into this tournament.

But I think we're doing a great job as a team of kind of handling it and just staying poised obviously on our home court.

Q. Maddy, you've been a freshman before, you've made a tournament debut before. How do you evaluate Hannah's performance?

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, she's a game changer. I think her presence, like I said, on the floor is just different. She sets the tone for us. Like I said, she's just a phenomenal player, phenomenal defender, and nobody can guard her.

Q. The zone was really tough right from the get-go. Were you thinking you'd have to change defenses at some point or you're just going to ride that until they found an answer for it?

NIELE IVEY: Right. Definitely I knew we were going to come in with the zone because they're so athletic. It worked, it was working, and I just stuck with it.

Q. Hannah, if I remember right, during the recruiting process, you went all the way to Hungary to watch her in a USA game and she wasn't committed, maybe hadn't even taken her final visit.

NIELE IVEY: No.

Q. When you're watching her over there and it looked like it paid off for you, did you have any sense that she would be this ready as a freshman to come in if she ended up at Notre Dame?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, she separated herself in the recruiting process. For her, I think Maddy mentioned, she does so many things. She played with such aggressiveness, and her defense is so electrifying. She's dynamic on both ends of the ball.

I felt like every time I watched her, recruited her, that she separated herself in the recruiting process the entire time. Not surprised. Obviously her consistency as a freshman has been phenomenal. Being an AP All-American as a freshman is something that is incredible, and she's led the NCAA in steals. She's led the ACC in scoring and in steals. It's just phenomenal what she's doing and what she's done this season.

Watching her, I knew she was going to be special here at Notre Dame, but she's exceeded my expectations because of the consistency in what she does.

Q. I think Nat was up to a career high in minutes today, and she had five assists, including that whip pass for the three. You mentioned how poised you thought she was. What did you particularly like about her game today besides the poise?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, Nat does things that don't show up on the stat sheet. She doesn't have to score 20 points. She does a lot of things that -- again, kind of just the unsung hero. Her presence, just altering shots. We're small at times, so she does a lot of physicality inside. They had a lot of bigs there, and I thought she was just solid.

Defensively she understands the offense. She's very smart. I think she does a great job of setting screens, posting up, and she just takes advantage of the opportunities. She has five assists and zero turnovers which I think for a post is huge. Not only does she have defensive presence, she's making things happen on the offensive end, which I'm really proud of her for that because she's stepping up in a very, very big role, and she's succeeding.

Q. Hannah and Maddy touched on this, but I wanted to get your take on it. Talk about the players outside of your big three. What do they bring on the stat sheet, off the stat sheet, Anna, KK, Nat, obviously not huge scorers. What do they do that make your team tick?

NIELE IVEY: We wouldn't be in this position without every single person on this team. We have seven, eight healthy players. Everyone does something, and every night someone does something special for us. AD, her experience, her ability to shoot the three. She's so crafty, so smart. She does a lot of little things. She's unselfish. She brings so much energy to our team.

KK plays the 1 through 4. She had a little bit of foul trouble today but I know I can count on her. She has a high IQ. She does whatever we ask, and she's unselfish.

Becky, as well, obviously Becky is going to get a little bit more minutes. She hasn't played as much, but when she comes in she does what I need her to do.

Sarah, she's the crowd favorite.

Everyone has a vital role, and at this point you have to be great at your role, and everyone is great at their roles right now, and I'm really appreciative of everyone. No matter how many points they score, everyone is a valuable piece

of this success ^ check .

Q. How valuable has KK been now without Kylee to have a player like her that can guard four positions and use in a variety of ways?

NIELE IVEY: It's huge. I think of her as a Jackie Young in the pass as far as being able to run the point but also go to the 4 if I need her to. She's an all-purpose player, very versatile, and she does a lot for us, and every game her position changes. She's done her job very well.

Q. Getting back to Hannah for a minute, Coach Yo was just in here and she spoke highly of the will she has, the relentlessness. Not saying everyone else doesn't have that, but how much more of that does she have, and how can you channel that in a way that might advance you past the Sweet 16, which is where this road has stopped you guys the last couple years?

NIELE IVEY: Right, I think her will is what makes her special. Because of her will, she steps on the court, she has no fear. When you have a point guard that's playing with no fear, everyone is confident around her because of that.

I think hopefully that hope in the next 40 minutes, that helps us get a little bit further, just having somebody with that type of presence, that type of swag. At this point it's confidence that gets you to the next round, and she carries that confidence with her and it's contagious, and I think that's going to really help us as we're playing Oregon State.

Q. You spoke of Ole Miss's athleticism and Hannah mentioned wanting to punch them in the mouth, 10-0 from the start. It looked like you guys wanted to match athleticism for athleticism at the beginning. How big was the dribble drive game and setting up all of that other stuff because it seemed like the offense was flowing from the beginning and that was the key to the whole 40 minutes?

NIELE IVEY: Right, for us we're a pace team. We're better in transition. We like to run. We like to play fast. So did Ole Miss. That was the goal. Get out and run, make them defend us. But we needed to get rebounds so that was a big key for us was to rebound out of the zone. I thought the zone could try to contain them, and then if we got rebounds we could run, and that's what happened right from the beginning.

Our goal was to come out very aggressive offensively to really, really push pace, and they did that. But I was really impressed with our defense. I thought our zone -- they

were so locked in on the scout. They knew where the shooters were. They did a great job of rebounding, put us up to 19, and then I thought that kind of gave us confidence throughout the game.

Q. You probably don't like to give labels to your players, but we know Hannah can score and steal. We know Maddy can rebound and play in the post. But as far as all-around game, is it even debatable that Sonia is up there?

NIELE IVEY: Absolutely. To be honest, I don't think we talk about her enough. Sonia Citron is unbelievable. She's so amazing. She's so poised. She doesn't need the spotlight. She just is. She's a star.

I'm so grateful for her, her leadership, everything that she's brought the last three years, and especially right now, battling an injury early on, to go through what she went through adversity-wise and has changed our program when she came back. I agree she's one of the best guards in the country.

Q. How good is it to be able to get Sarah into an NCAA Tournament game?

NIELE IVEY: That was awesome. I just love Sarah. First of all, she's really improved. She's like most improved to me on our team. She comes in every day. She works so hard. She's getting her shots up -- right after we beat Kent State, she was in the gym the next morning getting shots up on her own.

She's just a phenomenal young woman. She just does a lot for us that you don't really know as far as just practicing and making us better in practice, but she's also just a great fantastic person.

Q. Ole Miss players and Coach said that they expected a fight for both teams today but they were the only team that got beat us. I noticed you all were able to draw a foul on Ole Miss basically in the first 30 seconds of all four quarters, including a charge in there. How important was it to set that tone at the outset of every quarter?

NIELE IVEY: I didn't know that mindset was to attack. That was my mindset. At this point, anything can happen in March. I wanted to be the aggressor, and I was really proud of this group of having the confidence to do that.

I think the ACC prepares us. We've seen Louisville twice, NC State twice. Very athletic teams, very aggressive teams, so we were prepared to go against their athleticism, and I was really proud of the confidence that we came out

with.

Q. Then in the third quarter I believe you had seven assists on eight made baskets. How much does that reflect everybody playing a role and maximizing the sum of the team?

NIELE IVEY: Yes, that's exactly what it is. We love to share the ball. We're always working on reads, seeing the person that's open. It's never a one-sided offense. This ball moves very smoothly. I give them a lot of freedom. But we've learned how to play with each other, and I'm really impressed by the improvement of our all.

It changes depending on the defense, but I love how we're playing and sharing the ball.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports