

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Stephen F. Austin vs Notre Dame

Thursday, March 20, 2025

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

## Notre Dame Fighting Irish Niele Ivey

Sonia Citron

Hannah Hidalgo

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Notre Dame Fighting Irish press conference.

Coach, did you want to get us started with an opening statement.

NIELE IVEY: Just excited. Excited for this tournament. Excited to get started tomorrow. Just being at home is such a huge blessing. Excited to see the fans, to see women's basketball represented in South Bend. Extremely excited for this team and this opportunity to compete.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll start with questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Sonia, can you talk a little bit about being a senior leader. Do you talk much to your teammates about how to approach this or is it everybody has it figured out, I don't need to say anything?**

SONIA CITRON: Honestly, I don't think I need to say much. I think most of our team has been in this situation before, besides probably Kate, because she's a freshman.

We have a lot of upperclassmen that have been in these situations, and our underclassmen, I think they know what March Madness entails. I think there's not really been a lot of discussion on, like, what we need to do besides just hustle and give it your all.

I think everybody knows what their job is and what we're supposed to do 'cause it is March, so... I mean, I haven't talked a lot about it, at least, so...



**Q. Can you talk a little bit about what skills you have to have in order to master a quick study of an opponent, such a quick turnaround?**

SONIA CITRON: I mean, I think it's all just mental focus. I mean, like you said, we don't have a lot of time to practice for days. So I think it's just taking mental notes, focusing when we're watching film, doing mental reps in our head.

But yeah, it just takes a lot of focus.

**Q. Hannah, can you talk about the challenge you face in this first game, what you know about them, what you have to do to accomplish your goals.**

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, I think every team is going to be challenging. I think it's not taking any team for granted, and focusing on the next game. Taking it each day at a time.

I feel like we've had great practices. I think our biggest thing is locking down on defense, because we have the offense, we have the pieces to score. We've been doing a lot better on the defensive side, so I'm excited for what's to come for these next couple days.

**Q. Were there some specific things you worked on from the conclusion of the ACC tournament?**

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, I think we worked on everything honestly. Transition defense, a lot of ball screen defense, talking, rotation. Just defense as a whole. You can never be too great at defense. Just making sure we're able to get stops.

**Q. Did you do anything to reset as far as maybe team building besides just what you were doing on the court to put the ACC tournament behind you?**

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, I know we had a couple days to kind of go back to our families, just go and reset, wherever everybody went, anywhere. If they didn't see their family...



We had a couple days to reset and just focus on what's to come, get our mental right. We've been through a lot of highs and lows. Come back and reset and appreciate everything we have in the locker room is really important.

**Q. Do you think the fact that you came back and it was spring break, didn't have classes, people on campus, did that help you?**

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, absolutely. I was able to go back and see my family. It was really great to just kind of get away from sports a little bit, just kind of be able to regroup with my family.

**Q. Sonia, did you go anywhere or do anything?**

SONIA CITRON: Yeah, I went to Florida. Just my brother has a house there, so I got to just relax by the pool, clear my mind.

But yeah, I would also say that we also had a team dinner at Maddy's house, which was really nice. We were playing Mafia. It was nice, when basketball seems like the end of the world, we were just spending time together. It was nice.

**Q. Is Maddy a good cook?**

SONIA CITRON: She is. She's really good.

**Q. Is she the best cook on the team?**

HANNAH HILDAGO: I think we have a lot of good chefs on our team.

**Q. I have to know who else.**

SONIA CITRON: Maddy.

HANNAH HILDAGO: Cass works well. They're more on the healthier side, too.

SONIA CITRON: Definitely healthier side.

**Q. You mentioned getting that mental aspect right. Could you touch on what is your team's mentality heading into March Madness?**

SONIA CITRON: Honestly, I think we're just trying to give it our all. Like no matter what happens, I mean, at the end of the day you got to be able to say that you left everything out on the court.

I think our team has so much talent. I think what we want to prove to people is that we're going to be the hardest

working team on the court. So really just going into it with that mentality that it's win or go home. We're going to leave every ounce of everything we have on the court.

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, we're trying now even more than ever to trust wholeheartedly in each other. I think that's a big thing for us, trusting that my teammate has my back, my teammate is going to be there for rotation, help, talk to me.

A lot of the girls' last time putting on a Notre Dame jersey. Giving it everything we got knowing it's their last time playing at the collegiate level. I think that's a big thing. It's a lot on the line right now.

**Q. Hannah, you are a three seed. Is there a little bit of we'll show you guys? Is there motivation in terms of that?**

HANNAH HILDAGO: Yeah, I think we've been motivated, not so much because of our seeding. The committee, they gave us the seeding they thought we deserved. We're going to take it. We're grateful for the opportunity to play in March Madness.

We thank God for every opportunity we have. We get to play the game of basketball another day. A lot of teams can't say that they have that opportunity.

I think a lot of the motivation is just wanting to win, regardless of the seeding, if we had the last seeding or the first seeding. I think it's just a matter of wanting to win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you Sonia, Hannah.

We'll open it up to questions for Coach Ivey.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about your opponent, what the keys are that you see.**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, just a really great three-point shooting team, undersized, averaging nine made threes a game. Coming off an incredible conference tournament championship. Have won 14 straight games. Coming in with a lot of confidence.

Just really impressed by the way they play. They play very hard. They've got great shooters, like I mentioned. It's going to be a task for us to do a great job defensively. That's a big piece of what we're trying to accomplish tomorrow, is to be locked in defensively.

But they got great scorers, so we got to do a great job defending them.

**Q. How important is it for you and your team to set a tone right off the bat?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I think that's big. I mean, the sense of urgency is at an all-time high right now. Like Hannah mentioned, everything is on the line. You win or you go home. You have to show up with great, great tenacity and energy in this first game. Just coming out, opening this tournament, you have to come out with a sense of urgency, sense of just dominance and energy.

**Q. With regard to the style of many coaches in the game, some coaches are rocking a casual look, amazing sneakers. Some coaches have a different look. What are your thoughts on that? Is it about importance? Fun? Is it a way to bond with your team?**

NIELE IVEY: Yes, when I first got into coaching, I learned under a Hall of Fame coach. Being coached under Coach McGraw, her whole staff dressed up. Coaching with her we dressed up. Kind of the fabric of Notre Dame, what I'm used to style-wise.

I think fashion the last couple years has taken on a life of its own. You get a chance to really showcase your personality. For me, I like to look nice. I feel the way you look, you play good, feel good, and also just bringing power and elegance to the sideline.

I feel very confident in the choices that I choose as far as clothing, fashion. It's fun, but also I feel powerful. It's just something that has been a fabric of myself being a part of this program for a long time.

**Q. The cross that you wear, you have it every game.**

NIELE IVEY: Yes.

**Q. Is there any significance to it?**

NIELE IVEY: Well, my best friend gave it to me just as a Christmas gift. It has my son's initials on the backside of it. I'm a very faith-based person. Spirituality and my faith is really important to me.

It's just a special gift, but also my son's initials are on the back of it. Again, my faith in God. Spirituality is a big piece of me.

**Q. Your players talk about what they did to put the ACC tournament behind. Did you take any kind of break?**

NIELE IVEY: I wish I could have gone where they went (smiling).

Yeah, I did take a break. I was here in South Bend. Just took a couple days. Again, long season. Just needed that mental break to reset and recharge, just the way the team needed. That's the reason why that was a big piece of giving them that time off.

Got a chance to do some self-care things here in South Bend. Took a couple days taking my mind off of basketball. But just being with friends and trying to get a lot of rest.

With this season, you don't get a lot of rest as a coach. Taking some time for myself, getting locked in back to film after a couple days.

**Q. What does it say to you when you hear once they did get into town, Maddy did a dinner, they came together?**

NIELE IVEY: I love it. I think it's our culture, togetherness, sisterhood, that family atmosphere. They told me that they had dinner. I just loved the idea that they got a chance to get together and be away from the game but also connecting with each other.

I think connectivity is a big piece of chemistry. When I found out they had dinner, it warmed my heart. I was really happy they got a chance to spend some time together, especially being away for a couple days.

**Q. Do you agree that Maddy is a good cook?**

NIELE IVEY: She posts a lot on social media. She's understanding her nutrition, very important to her. Very healthy. I'm sure that the dishes were fantastic. They love cooking. She loves cooking. I'm sure it was delicious.

**Q. Natalie Achonwa on the Michigan staff, returning to Notre Dame for the first time. She's coaching in March Madness. What is it like seeing a player who you've seen in the Notre Dame program come full circle?**

NIELE IVEY: I think it's amazing. When we saw the draw, the brackets, I was like, Great, Ace is coming home. She's a phenomenal woman, has had so much success as a player. I knew she was going to be a phenomenal coach.

For her to get her first opportunity at a storied program like Michigan is big. I'm excited. I haven't had a chance to see her. Excited she gets a chance to come back home.

Again, she's going to be a phenomenal coach. Is already doing a great job with the Michigan staff. Really proud of her and excited her full-circle moment back in the NCAA

tournament is back at Notre Dame.

**Q. What does it mean to you seeing her as a mom and a coach and the experience that you've had?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, absolutely. So proud of her. She's a phenomenal mother. I went to Paris and watched our (indiscernible) prosper and Ace play. Saw Mav over there in Paris. He's just a happy young boy, baby boy. He's her inspiration. You can just tell the way that she mothers. She's done just a great job.

I know it's hard balancing both. She's a part of a family and environment there that allows her to do both. I'm happy to be that example for her, that you can balance both worlds. You can be a mom, a working mom, and also be a phenomenal mother. That's exactly what she's doing.

I'm really proud of her. I sent her texts throughout the season saying how well she's doing, keep it up, because it is challenging. She's found a way to be able to balance both, and doing a great job doing that.

**Q. What is important about the visibility of seeing coaches who are moms?**

NIELE IVEY: I mean, I think just realizing that you can. There's balance. You can still have a work life balance. You don't have to choose one or the other. You can still be successful and be a mother. Being able to balance both I think is the significance of that.

I'm happy that I can always be a resource for her at any time she needs. I was just in her shoes 20 years ago.

**Q. Any concerns about the way the team finished up the season? Does the team have a killer instinct, it's going to emerge?**

NIELE IVEY: I think those were setbacks for us, lessons for us. It was definitely hard last couple weeks trying to get back to who we are, our identity. Got to get back to work. It's part of the game.

As long as you learn from those lessons, those failures, they can always provide growth. That's what I'm looking for for our team.

We had some great practices, time off for us to regroup. Tomorrow you're going to see a different team. What I want the crowd to see is to see a team that's going to leave it all out on the floor, like Sonia says, with a defensive tenacity. That's an area I'm trying to fix.

**Q. Having dealt with some of the adversity late in the**

**season, how does being able to play this first game, potentially first two games, on your own home court give you an advantage having had success there?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, just being familiar here at home. We put in the work all season long. Had an extremely tough schedule. Put ourselves in this position to host. I'm super grateful.

But it doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter who we play, seeding. You have to come up and show up for 40 minutes. That's my level of focus for this team.

It feels great obviously to be at home, but also this is March Madness. It does not matter, any given night any team can beat you. You have to have that mindset coming in no matter where you are that you have to show up and play great basketball for 40 minutes.

**Q. Olivia Miles, her journey at Notre Dame, becoming a lottery pick, her stock in the WNBA rising. How proud are you of her accomplishments and what don't we know about this journey?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, she's just had an incredible season. Her injury, she had to battle through a lot of adversity with her ACL. She's come back super strong, has had an incredible year. She's done so much.

When she came back, first triple-double her first return was just phenomenal to have her back, going through so much. She put in so much work in the off-season, having a very long road before she came back.

For me, I'm just really proud. I've been through two ACLs, so I know how that feels, having the game taken away from you and having to fight to come back stronger than you were before.

I think she's done a great job of leading our team, coming in with such dominance and confidence. She has really changed the team this year having her back. I think there's a big difference when she's on the floor.

I'm really proud of her, what she's accomplished already. Excited what she's going to continue doing.

**Q. What's the difference in a mindset for a senior who this is the last time at the NCAA tournament? I'm sure it's different for a senior, right?**

NIELE IVEY: It is. I think it's just like that thought of this could be it. That sense of urgency is very heightened as a senior 'cause you know at any given time you don't have another year. You have to leave it all on the floor. There's

no more basketball after this. Knowing you're one-and-done, win or go home, it's heightened.

The pressure is heightened, but also that level of urgency is a lot higher than it is of anybody else returning, having more years in college. It's heightened. It's also exciting because you know seniors are going to give it their all because this is it for them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much for joining us.

NIELE IVEY: Thanks.

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