

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - UC Irvine vs Gonzaga

Friday, March 22, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

McCarthy Athletic Center

Gonzaga Bulldogs

Lisa Fortier

Media Conference



Unfortunately it's not a great time for that. You can't have those kind of lapses in the big moments, and so we're going to do our best to not have a repeat of that, ever again, but certainly not in our next opportunity, which is tomorrow.

LISA FORTIER: We're really excited to be here. It's nice to be in this room instead of some room somewhere else. Something we haven't been able to do in my ten years as a head coach yet.

Obviously as an assistant I spent a lot of time in NCAA Tournament games here at Gonzaga but never in this regard. And I'm just excited for our team to have earned this opportunity and looking forward to the game tomorrow against Irvine and seeing what we can put together.

Q. The players were reassessing the loss in the WCC, how have you dealt with it --

LISA FORTIER: What did they say? You know, we weren't very good. Portland was better on that day. Obviously it was a close game. It wasn't like they were significantly better than us.

But I don't think we played to our potential at all and that's always two-sided. That's partially on our team and how we performed, and then it's also on what you allowed the other team's preparation and what they were able to do against us.

I thought that we had shown that we were such a better team than how we were on that day, both from adjusting to the defenses that were thrown at us, and also adjusting defensively. I didn't think we made great in-game adjustments. That was -- we have talked a lot, even this morning, we were discussing some things we were talking about, accountability in our leadership locker room because we have several things we go through and that's the stage we are on right now. Our coaching staff could have been better. I could have been better. Our players could have been better. Our leadership could have been better.

Q. I remember in an interview after a game, you guys were on a streak of maybe 15 or so games of ten-plus points winning, and you were like, well, I can't ask the other teams to make it a closer game. And then you got a closer game, and obviously you didn't win but it was still a close game and a great experience. How does that help you going into the tournament where there's bound to be close games?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I think it's great for us to have -- we mentioned it in all the close games we had last season, we never one time worked on situations in practice. We had them every game, or every other game. This was a ton of them.

And this year, for at least two months, we have not had any close games, and the closest one was 12, and really, it was 27 before it got to 12.

So I think that those are just very valuable situations. Nobody likes to be in them. As the coach, I'm like, it's good for the fans to have close games. I'd rather it just be 30, that's great. But we've been able to look at what we did and how the time-out went, and you know, whose voices we're hearing and what was supposed to go like this, but actually went like that and that was not the last two time-outs.

It was throughout the last quarter and different times throughout the game. So those things just teach new ways that you can't be taught when you're up a bunch of points. When you have that buffer, we're not looking at every set up for a screen or every pass that you make, every check-out. You don't evaluate those things in the same way when you're up because you have such a big margin for error at that time.

And so I think it's been great. We've looked at the film. We've talked through it. We have practiced situationally.



We've looked at the exact play and talked about what we said in the time-out and how that should have gone, how we could have made that more clear and how the players could have heard it a little different way, and I think come to a place where we all agree we could have done better. Just looking forward to that next chance.

That's what always happens. When you lose a game, you always want the next chance. You get to the point in the year where you have to be good; otherwise you don't have that next chance. For us, we're lucky in that we have a chance to hopefully right that ship a little bit.

Q. U.C. Irvine, defensively, that's their strong suit. They give up just around 55 a game. What did you say about them as a unit and just how you guys feel about that matchup?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, they are a great defensive team, and it's a different type of strategy than some teams. Some teams press you full court. Some teams zone you the whole time. Some teams fundamentally want to keep you in front. They are trying to put pressure on you, trying to turn you over and make you shoot faster than you want to shoot and speed you up, and they are really good at it. Their top guards really set the stone, those two guards that play up front.

It's difficult if you don't execute, if you don't have has Christmas on your pass or you don't have ball fakes, or you are not fundamentally sound, they will get you. It's a tough defense to go against. It's different than what we see every day, and I think that's the strength of their team.

If they can turn you over and get going in transition, they can get some attacks to the basket, then they are really good. We have some things in place but I think their defense is really solid. It's evident that they work a lot on that and they pride themselves in how they guard.

Q. What does it mean for you to finally be hosting and be a top 4-seed?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I'm just happy for our players. I don't know how much you know about the players we have on our team but four came back for a COVID senior year. They could have anywhere else. They could have gone to play pro. They came back with this as a goal of theirs, that they set, not that we set. We just want to play out best all the time, coaches do. And they wanted to put themselves to be in a position where this would be an opportunity that they could experience.

So I'm really happy for them, the rest of the team as well, but those guys who made that extra commitment. And it's

just fun. It's different. When you're on the road, it feels like you're all coming in on a bus, and this time our players are still going to class. Yvonne took a big test this morning. Ella has one after practice. It's a unique experience and it's not -- there's not all bonuses.

But we keep talking about how it might feel a little bit different than it does when you're in a new place that you haven't played before or on the road. But hopefully tomorrow at 4:30 it's going to feel like it's all worth whatever is odd at having to go to class and having the normal amount of meals and having to cook your dinner or whatever that looks like.

I've been both a proponent -- I've understood it and been frustrated with it over the years because when I was an assistant coach and we were hosting, we had such great experiences here, and Gonzaga and Spokane is a great basketball community; and I think that they can sell out the building and provide a great quality student athlete experience.

So when the NCAA Tournament made the adjustment to go into the Top-16 seeds, I understood trying to prioritize the top teams. But I also knew what we had been able to do here as a lower-seeded team. For us, it's just another great experience. It's fun to have quality teams come into our town, our gym, to play us.

I know we already got to experience your guys's team once before. We'll see what happens after tomorrow but we are just excited to have this opportunity and have earned it. It feels like in the past, our teams had earned a spot into the NCAA Tournament but they had not earned this, and so that's a little bit of a coup for this team and what they have been able to accomplish.

Q. A few of the players have mentioned a mental shift, a shift in standards from last season to this season. Were those conversations initiated by you guys and the coaching staff or was that something that the players kind of took a lead on to go from an already good to a great team?

LISA FORTIER: I think that they might have been led by them. Brynna and Yvonne and the Truongs and Eliza, they approached me and Mike Nilson this year and wanted to put together a leadership committee, if you say it like that. We preach leadership development throughout the entirety of their time at Gonzaga. We have a leadership loop that's 18-weeks that we go through, talk about a bunch of different things, and we have done that for the last several years. We meet with a consult who helps us be the best, most connected team we can. We are trying all the things.

But this was the first time that those guys initiated that part, and then we've been a happy and willing partner with them on just trying to figure out how we can operate better, how we can prepare better and how we can manage the good and the bad days better. They are a group of really thoughtful upperclassmen. We have a lot of players like that but they care deeply. They are hoopers. And they are all going to go on to be something else after basketball is over, I know, but they are going to play basketball as long as they possibly can, and I think that when they are making the commitment to be at Gonzaga for their fifth year, they want to find a way to make that the best year that they could.

So far it's worked pretty well on what they have done and we have not solved all the world's problems up there. We have still gone through stuff. But they did set the tone, and they came in, their first list was about, you know, pretty long, of what their standards were. They said, okay, it's hard to have 52 that were all doing perfectly all the time but let's strive for that and I think for the most part, they have found a way to pick the ones that were most important to them and execute them well.

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