

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

McCarthy Athletic Center

Gonzaga Bulldogs

Lisa Fortier

Kayleigh Truong

Yvonne Ejim

Media Conference

Gonzaga 60, UC Irvine 39

LISA FORTIER: It was just a lot of fun. Hopefully these guys had fun. Hopefully you guys had fun. Really exciting to be here and to have the energy that we had in the building. I like that our team struggled and we found a way to overcome a little bit of struggle in the first quarter. We weren't at our best in that quarter, but when you can be not at your best and go and put consecutively 20 points each quarter or month after that, we're just tough. Our defense carried us a little bit today, and we were able to get enough stops to put it together. I loved how we shared the ball.

Our team, like a lot of teams, is better when we're having fun, and it was evident somewhere in the middle of the second quarter, third quarter, everywhere besides the first quarter kinda, that it was a really fun atmosphere and they were fun out there, playing loose, and I'm just really happy for these guys.

Q. You got those two quick fouls. How were you able to play through that and focus?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Just leaning on my teammates. They were fighting. They were telling me, we're going to be okay. It happens. My second one was kind of like a boneheaded play, probably shouldn't have tried to screen the player off. But besides the point. I had a lot of my teammates in my ear just telling me, we're going to need you at some point, so I was just keeping myself level-headed and just trying to stay focused.

Q. Yvonne, you probably don't know this yet, but you now have the most field goals in one season for a



Gonzaga player. But it came with a lot of hard work. You probably had contact on every play. It was a physical game. How did you play through that?

YVONNE EJIM: I think if anything, I also thrive off physical games, so I really enjoyed that part. But I think if anything, just staying confident and consistent in not only my shots but my teammates' shots, as well. Even if it's physical and I can't get a lot of shots down there, knowing my team can still score, I think that's really the premise of it, and from that I get energy and scoring, too. I think leaning on them, leaning on our offense, evening on each other, I think that's what's really helped my offensive game flow this season.

Q. Kayleigh, have saved that 1-2-2 zone in your pocket for this time?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: We've always had it. We've implemented it here and there. We'll sprinkle it in. But we're man-to-man heavy, but we work on our zone a lot, too.

Q. For Yvonne and Kayleigh, how much did you feed off the energy of the home crowd tonight, and how much would you say that was instrumental in the victory?

YVONNE EJIM: I feel like it's just great anyways whether we have a packed gym or not. Our Zags fans bring a lot of energy, but today especially with the student section just being filled, I think especially when we went on our runs, we felt the energy, especially when we come back on defense, everyone is cheering, everyone is clapping, not only around us but on our team, too, and I think that really fed into the intensity that we kept up throughout the game. Very thankful to everyone who came out today to support us. I think that really helped us today.

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Yeah, ditto. The energy is insane, but it plays a lot into momentum, too. It helps us kind of up our energy at least. Yeah, we're super grateful for everyone that showed up.

Q. Yvonne, you mentioned enjoying thriving off the physical play. I don't want to say it went away, but



everybody seemed to find a way to negate a bit there around the start of the second quarter. What changed for the team there that allowed you to open up the game a little more?

YVONNE EJIM: I think if anything, it also just came from us just continuing to shoot, and from that, we made shots, and I feel when we do finally find our flow then everything kind of pieces together and we have a lot more options that then open for us just because we have a lot of offensive power on this team. If one person can making shots, they're taking away, another person can make shots, too. I feel like in and of itself when we find flow it just helps everyone kind of get their rhythm back again.

Q. You guys were able to win the turnover battle against a UC Irvine team that looks to get turnovers and push that pace. How were you guys able to do that?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Just staying calm and having each other's back. I know there was not one possession where I feel like somebody ran away, and everyone was just coming back to the ball, and we didn't leave anyone on an island, and that was definitely one of our keys to success.

YVONNE EJIM: I think we also had a lot of composure, as well, just each of us, and then playing together and not leaving anybody on an island, I think that really helped us just stay in control.

Q. I think it was Brynna yesterday mentioned that Gonzaga basketball is when you guys are smiling and you're having fun out there and working together. When do you feel like that sort of clicked in this game specifically, at what point?

YVONNE EJIM: Probably the start of the second quarter. I feel like we were up in defense, up on offense, and we were having fun the whole game after that for sure. Not to say that we weren't having a lot of fun in the first quarter. It wasn't the greatest. But like a lot more fun.

Q. UCI got off to that hot start offensively. What was the message to the team coming out in the second quarter?

LISA FORTIER: Well, I didn't think -- we weren't defending very well. We don't have a quarter goal on what we're doing. We're more by percentages, and in that quarter they were well above the percentage that we typically aspire to hold teams under defensively, and so the message was, you guys, we've got to get stops so we can run. We love to transition. Their pressure -- then we're bogged down. If they kept scoring then we're bogged

down offensively because they're able to get into their press. It was just we've got to have each other's back. We have to get to the help side when we need to get to the help side. If we need to double-team somewhere, we need to double there.

But just kind of follow the scout a little bit better so that we can get some stops so that we can go on the other side, if not in transition just with some flow that they mentioned and not have to go against the press attack every single time.

Q. You guys have played that 1-2-2 zone at different times here and there, but you haven't had to play it a lot this year. Was the plan -- you were basically in it for three quarters. Was that the plan to say that long in it, or was it just effective?

LISA FORTIER: You know, we have several presses and several zones and a lot of different options in man. Typically I like -- we like to change things up. We have since I was an assistant coach, I used to run the defense, and I think sometimes I get stuck in one type of defense, and I'm trying not to be like that. We were encouraging the team to play free, and so I was also telling them that I was going to coach freely, so be ready for us -- they don't shoot a ton of threes, and there's a few of the players who do, and then the other ones not so many, and then the percentages are a little bit lower besides a couple. So we just thought that was an option that we might have if we were having a hard time keeping them in front because they're athletic and they love to drive to the basket.

We had talked about it. We run the 1-3-1 a little bit more than we have this year the 1-2-2 or the 3-2, whatever you want to call it, so we were ready for whatever we have. But trying to stay ready, and then when it worked, we decided to keep it in. There was a lot of times we were in it -- I think in that second quarter we were supposed to be in it until they scored on us, and then we got a lot of stops. Even when they did score on us, we decided that we liked it. So practice it some.

I wouldn't say it was a huge part of the game plan, but I think it was more about how we were going to give what we had and throw whatever we needed to throw at them.

Q. It seemed like you really needed a spark, and that really did it.

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, we needed stops. 17 points, we haven't given up 17 very often at all. We needed stops so that we could get baskets.

I think that that's what we needed. We needed some way.



Kayleigh getting her second foul, that kind of coincided with things where we knew we weren't going to -- we're a little bit depleted right now, so we're down to only eight, so we weren't going to risk that and try to play her intermittently to give Lynne and Brynna and Esther and Claire some of those breaks, but specifically Lynne and Brynna, and so we needed to use it in that way, which I think a lot of people do that, to protect people when there's foul trouble, so it worked out well today.

Q. Brynna Maxwell, known for her shooting. Today she didn't have her best shooting day, 2 for 7, but still on the plus minus she was plus 32. That was I think 10 higher than the next player on your team. Speak to more than just her shooting. What does she do for your team?

LISA FORTIER: Well, she stretches the defense. She is a threat. It's just like shot blockers -- great shot blockers. It's not always the shots that they block, it's just the threat of the blocked shot. With a player like Brynna they were in her shorts the whole time. They had to help, they had to switch, they had to double. They were trying desperately not to let her get a three off, and that just brings attention.

Same thing that happens sometimes with Vonne. Really we've got a lot of those kind of players in our starting lineup.

But with her, she was bringing attention, and that opened up with people who share the ball and pass the ball well don't turn it over a lot. That creates opportunity.

So we have to remind her of that sometimes, that you don't have to make all the baskets. Just being out here and doing things how you're supposed to do them, that's effective for us, as well, and no one has to carry everything, so as much as each of you individually and Brynna, as well, just wants it desperately, let the team be the strength of our team and not have to be you. It was a little reminder of that, but they were flying around -- when she got an open look, everybody on the Irvine bench was shouting, no, no, she's over there. It seemed like their whole section of fans were telling them, too. Everybody in the gym knows what she can do.

I think that's what she brings, even when she's not making shots. Plus the other stuff, too.

Q. Forgive me if you've already answered this, but I would like to know your thoughts about at the beginning the atmosphere in that arena and the way it just kind of -- it had such a great feel those first few minutes. Maybe not for you because of what was

going on on the court.

LISA FORTIER: So it's funny, when I was an assistant coach, I remember it being so loud, and I have a very vivid picture, we were playing Iowa, and my son was asleep in the stands across -- I've never heard it louder before.

It seemed loud when I came out today, and then I told -- they were talking about the energy, and I said, were the students loud? I didn't hear them. I think when the game happens, you sort of -- there's that. But I could feel the energy in the building for sure, especially when we finally made a three. It took us a while, and we're a really good three-point shooting team.

Maybe in the beginning, and then maybe it was a little -- because we didn't give them a whole lot to cheer for for a small portion of the game, but then after that I did feel the energy rise and I heard them a couple times. You can tell by the looks on the players' faces, and when they make one of those shots or Vonny does something or we get a steal or we get a stop -- I heard it when we started getting stops. That's actually when I started to feel it was we got a couple stops in a row, we started to make our run. I don't know if that was -- probably it had to be the beginning of the second because there wasn't a lot of run happening in the first, and that's when I started to feel it a little bit more. No disrespect to the crowd. I'm sure it was really loud. I think I've just trained myself to block it out like my son did 20 years ago or 15 years ago.

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