

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Utah vs Gonzaga

Tuesday, March 26, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

McCarthy Athletic Center

Gonzaga Bulldogs

Coach Lisa Fortier

Yvonne Ejim

Kayleigh Truong

Media Conference

Gonzaga 77, Utah 66

LISA FORTIER: I'm just really happy for our players. These guys, they set their own goals and want to break all these records and do all these things that people at Gonzaga haven't done before. You have to keep reminding them check them off little by little.

So if you want to do things we haven't done, you got to go one step at a time. They played tough today. The second quarter -- Utah is a great third quarter team, and they're a really good team anyway, but we wanted to be strong in the third quarter but our second quarter turned out as huge decider in the game.

I love how tough our team played when it got rough out there, it got close. I don't know if they cut it to 6 or 5, 7, something like that.

6, yeah. I don't know. I just know that we came down and made some free throws and we got the stop that we needed. We got the rebounds. All of a sudden here comes Eliza and Vonny on the glass.

So I just love how we covered for each other in every area today, and really proud of our effort, these two and all the guys back in the locker room.

Q. Kayleigh, can you walk us through that second quarter? Take us through that second quarter a little bit where it seemed like you guys hit 7 of 8 shots and 5 straight from three. What was working so well offensively in the second?



KAYLEIGH TROUNG: I think we were just moving the ball from one side of the court to the other. We weren't stagnant at all. I felt like. I was running through our plays just nonstop. I thought we moved it well, too, and just were very sure not to get sloppy or casual with it. Once we get multiple touches from both sides it's hard to defend the court the whole time.

Q. For either of you two, lots of free throws there down the stretch when the game got really close. Seemed like you made every one of them. I think 11 of 13. Nerves at that point or were you totally locked in?

YVONNE EJIM: Locked in for sure. I think if anything, when I got to the line, like right there in that moment I said, this is my chance to do something for my team.

So I think if anything, completely locked into like what I can provide for my team. And for like free throws that's what we practice and what we do and how we contribute.

KAYLEIGH TROUNG: Yeah, I was telling Vonny, if we're not going to score this possession and get to the free throw line we have to reward ourselves somehow for this possession.

I thought we did a really good job of that. Didn't take any the free throws for granted.

Q. At times it felt like it was a game of runs. You guys would go on a run and Utah would settle in and go on a run. How did you guys keep in focus and just making sure that you didn't allow that to keep piling up?

YVONNE EJIM: Yeah, I think if anything, we have a lot of good leaders on our team, and this one right here, I felt like any time -- let's say they got a shot in or they got a stop on us and things like that, she's always telling us right here in the moment, right here.

I think just at that grounding we get especially from Leigh and other people on our team, it's so important for everyone to lean into that.

Like we're each other's supporters, so if we have each



other, then we're straight.

Q. Vonny, talk about the battle you had with Pili out there. You guys are just -- you must have left bruises on each other out there?

YVONNE EJIM: Probably. It was definitely a physical game down there. I definitely respect her game so much. I mean, she's an amazing player, so I'm just happy I got to fight it out with her today.

If anything, like kudos to her and the team. They played really hard. We're just coming out, playing with a lot of energy and matching their physicality. They brought a lot of it, physicality. That's the game. If we have to step up and do that, we're going to do that. I think we did that well today.

Q. Kayleigh, in the third quarter at one point five straight threes in the second. You hit the first three threes in the third. (No microphone.) Could you feel the crowd kind of bringing you on?

KAYLEIGH TROUNG: Oh, 100%. They were locked in as much as we were. That gives us a lot of the energy, especially when we're trying to look for some momentum.

They're there, backing us up, whenever, wherever, whatever play, whatever happens. You hear them nonstop.

Q. Was going up into the stands planned? Tell me about that celebration.

YVONNE EJIM: No. (Laughter.) I was kind of like, let's go. The student section, they brought it today. Kudos to them. They brought it on Saturday, so like kudos them. I think I talked about this last time, just their energy and all the other Zags fans we have, they bring so much energy and encouragement to our game.

You got give them credit for what they do. It's not easy going up there and standing the whole game and cheering people on and losing your voices and things.

Q. This is for both of you. This is the first time this unit has gotten out of the first weekend. What are some of the things that it took to get here?

KAYLEIGH TROUNG: I think it started from the jump, right before pre-season even started. Like Coach Lisa said, we all came together as a team and we set a standard. We wanted what we wanted. This was part of our -- one of our goals.

So I talk about this team all the time, but we were so committed to each other. You can tell from the practices. I wish ya'll can sit in and see how we go head-to-head every time trying to get each other better.

Then when we step on the court, it makes it -- yeah, definitely.

Q. Kayleigh, what does it mean for you and the other seniors to get those practice games for your home crowd?

KAYLEIGH TROUNG: It means a lot. It's very special. We said our good-bye speeches during senior night, but it's -- I'm just so grateful that we got another chance to play two more games at this home court. There is nothing like it here.

Like just a lot of gratitude. I keep saying that, but a lot of gratitude to everyone that just showed up for us.

Q. For both of you, there is only four programs that have both the men's and women's teams playing in the Sweet 16. Just in the bigger picture of basketball here at this school, what does that mean to you?

YVONNE EJIM: Yeah, I think if anything, like we go to work here at Gonzaga. We build people, we build players, we build programs that can do what they need to do and get things done. Both the men's and women's side does a great job of that and a great job of kind of building their athletes. And not even just like our sport, but other sports as well, so kudos to this school.

But I think if anything, like it's just a testimony to the work we've put in from the get-go. Congrats to the guys. They're going to the Sweet 16 as well. I think if anything, you just got to see how we play and it'll kind of reflect what Gonzaga is about what Gonzaga basketball is about.

Q. I think the guy's team was home. I think they were there tonight. Just what is it like for ya'll to be able to support each other? (Regarding WCC tournament.) You get to cheer each other on. How much do you think that helps your programs?

YVONNE EJIM: I think if anything, it kind of just like reflects kind of that connectedness we have between our sports. I think it's amazing that we have our guys out here cheering for us. We go to their games sometimes when we're home and we have the opportunity to during conference and pre-season as well.

So I think it's just great to have their support here in the crowd.

Q. So throughout this weekend there has been multiple times where the crowd has just erupted, whether it's a shot or rebound or whether it's a block. Do you have a favorite moment when the crowd just went berserk or something went right from the weekend?

YVONNE EJIM: I don't know what it was, but I think we were on a run or something like that, and there was like a timeout taken and I was coming in, and I literally got a head rush because the crowd was like so loud, like so loud.

You know, anybody have an apple watch and the 90 decibels go off? Mine was at like 250. The crowd was intense in that moment. I don't know exactly what play, but I literally stopped in my tracks and I was shook.

I was like, oh, my gosh, guys, like, let's go. It just kind of all went in me. It fed into my energy, too.

KAYLEIGH TROUNG: Yeah, no, I felt like the whole game was just -- you could hear the crowd the whole game. I think one was when we went on a run -- it was a fast break and Vonny, you passed it to Eliza and I think Eliza got the and-one. That as like, I couldn't hearing anything. I couldn't even hear myself talk to them in the huddle, so, yeah.

Q. Your offense has been good at various points this year, but second quarter, why was it that good that quarter?

LISA FORTIER: Gosh, I don't know. I think our defense was better than our offense in that quarter. You know what I mean? We've had -- for us, a 20-point quarter is pretty regular. A lot of teams hope for those kind of things. We can put 20, 24 together. We've had 32 I think was our high this season.

So we have a lot of offensive firepower. I think our defense was good because we were getting stops, and so we were playing free and loose, you know -- our offense was good because our defense was good.

So I think that feeds into it. And this team, when this buckle down and get a stop, you go in transition and it doesn't matter how good a transition defense team you have, there are people open places. If you want to take someone away, I've said it all year, it's very difficult.

They didn't really double team Vonny too much today. They switched the matchup when they didn't like the one matchup for Eliza I think more than Vonny. It's like, what

are you going to do?

As soon as you try it take away Brynna, they were in her shorts. They were trying hard to keep her off the -- well, they got other players who can shoot the three. So that's when Lynney got off loose a little bit, Eliza got a couple at that time. Leigh made one or two at that time. I don't know who made all which ones.

I think that's what it is, is if you get the stops then it makes your offense a whole lot better.

Q. You were talking about getting stops. I noticed Utah almost always had a player posted in the left corner, sagged off that a lot. Other than Pili, not much you can do there. A lot of 0-fors and one-fors on the score sheet. How were you going to neutralize the other players as successfully as you did?

LISA FORTIER: Alissa had a great game and she's a great player. We knew they were going to go to her. You go through the scouting report and Vonny was joking about it, they run this, that, and what happens at the end? The ball goes to Alissa. This, that, and the other -- and the ball goes to Alissa.

So they have really good shooters, but we have a similar style of play. We have a player like that. Seems like ball goes there, and then either you get scored on or they kick it out to a three point shooter.

But they were trying to just go to 'Liss today it seemed like. That's why she had 35. Some of the other guys I think were not in flow maybe. I'm not exactly sure. Our focal point defensively was try to not leave anyone on an island on Alissa. We didn't. She's just that good sometimes.

I so think that's part the of reason. Maybe they weren't in flow. Sometimes it was coming out, but they had to work for it. I think we closed out well, so it wasn't like we just double teamed Alissa and gave up -- took our chances on other guys. We were trying to get to them and we mostly did.

Q. If I remember right, I think Utah went on a 13 to 3 run, they went up by I think 7 or so. Was there anything you had to say to your team in the timeout that got that rally? Then I think you went on that run that really changed the course of the game.

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I don't remember what I said exactly. I know my goal for the game was to kind of be what they needed me to be and deescalate and put them in a position to make basketball plays. They're really good basketball players. They're smart. They're old. They've

played a lot of games. They have had the ball in their hands a lot.

I think at that point we were talking about maybe some help side things. I think we had picked up one foul on Alissa. They went right in. Maybe she popped for a three or two. Might have gotten two threes right off the bat, and so we wanted to adjust to that. It's tough to figure out.

But I think really it was just trying to steady the moment and make sure that we were okay. No need to freak out. We're okay.

Q. You know, so you're going to the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2015. You guys have been such a consist of the program. You are the only mid-major left in the women's tournament. On the men's side we hear people say all the time the Gonzaga men are not a mid-major. They're so good. They're basically a Power 5 school. Is it time we start thinking about the Gonzaga women that way, too, do you think?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, we're long past it. I love you, too. It's like when I took over as the head coach we had to start from scratch again to get back to this point. We were really not really like a mid-major. We had Courtney Vandersloot here and Heather Bowman and Tiffany Shives here and Vivian Frieson here and we made all those runs. And we haven't had a deep one since I've been head coach. We had one Sweet 16 run.

So it's been some time, but every year we're competitive and every year we compete with those teams. So yes is the answer. I would be happy to hear us not be considered in this realm, except for we also don't care because we're not listening to what everyone else is saying. We are trying to stay in our locker room and focused on things that we can control, and we can't control all these other things.

I do appreciate you saying that. I know you know the quality of our program and I think all the people out there who know the quality of our program probably haven't been calling us a mid-major for a long time.

Q. Yvonne Ejim has been terrific all season. She got 17 today. In the first half, 50% of your shots were from behind the arc. Was that a game plan going in or an adjustment? You mentioned them in Brynna's shorts so you looked to other people who were more open because of that. Game plan or adjustment?

LISA FORTIER: I would say both. Maybe. We like to go inside out. We like to have balanced offense. Every time a recruit asks me what kind of offense do you run, we run in transition and we like balance. We need forwards who can

shoot it from inside and score from the perimeter, guards who can attack. We like people who can shoot. We'll take the ones who can post up. Like just having a balance and a variety.

Today we went to Von quite a bit. She brings attention, so sometimes there was attention that came in there. People dug in. Otherwise, in our some of our continuities that we run, they're coming off ball screens, cutting, reading each other.

When you have such a veteran group who -- I trust the Truongs to have the ball in their hands against any team, and they're going to make better decisions that I'm going to direct.

So just let it go through them a little bit. It happened to be that we were getting a lot of those threes. Then different time we went to Vonny a little bit for. I think the balance was the key.

Q. Two questions. What is it about the sisters that you feel that confident that you don't need to direct them, they just know what play to make out there?

LISA FORTIER: Well, I mean, I basically raised them as my own. They've been here for so long. No, I think that they have been here for a long time. Kayleigh started starting in her freshmen year and they've just logged a lot of minutes. They've proven that they can make those decisions.

We always say there is a lot of freedom with understanding in our program. When you're younger, until you said what we are trying to get, then we might try to direct you a little bit more. Those guys, as fifth years who have logged plenty of minutes and been in lots of big games and big moments, I'm confident they know what to do and they're going to do it well and step up at the right moments.

So I just think they've proven over time that they're capable of those things. Then they trust us. We cover for each other. We lean back and forth. Me and them, Stacy and them, Craig and them. Those guys call more the offense. Stacy and Craig and Jordan does more defense. So the three of us are kind of working with those two.

Really they have proven they can handle it.

Q. I know how far you advanced in the tournament every year doesn't define the success of a program, but it has been nine years since you got this far. What does that mean to you to get there again?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I just think we try. It's sometimes

about draw and sometimes it's about health. You know, I don't know if Utah was a good draw for us, and we're not healthy, so sometimes it's just you got -- the ball goes in the basket when it's supposed to and you get the stops you need to.

So if that's what it's about, then I'm really happy for these players. I'm sorry I don't remember where you're from, which paper?

Q. AP.

LISA FORTIER: So I don't know how much you are familiar with our team, but with those guys coming back for their fifth year, they could have all been playing pro, playing whoever school in the world. So the four of those super seniors, and throw Vonny into that, they came back with passion and something they didn't have necessarily before.

So I think the part that means a lot is that these guys get to experience -- I've been to quite a few of them, five or whatever, six, I don't know, but they haven't. It's not about being a head coach or an assistant coach. It's about the players in there getting to experience it. So that's why it's meaningful to me.

Q. You're going to be heading into an environment in Portland in which, A, you're the underdog so people are going to be naturally cheering for you; B, there is a lot of regionality there, a lot of Zags in Portland. How much you looking forward to that?

LISA FORTIER: I think it's great. You know, I'm really excited for us to get down there. You know, it's not a home environment, but I think that we're pretty comfortable in that underdog space. That's what it feels like we are just because that's who we're built on a little bit here at Gonzaga. I know the Zags are everywhere, but it's nice to have to only go an hour away, five hours in a car, and hopefully Spokane will show up down there, too.

The whole thing is going to be exciting, so I think that's great. Great that we're still playing. Great that my players made all those baskets. Right now you could really tell me, hey, your daughter wants to make some cookies when you get home, what's that environment going to be like? I'm like, it's going to be awesome. Let's do it, because I'm just happy for them.

I know we're going to be well supported down there and it's going to be fun.

Q. Coach, you always speak very highly of your four seniors who came back. What does it mean for you to

see them get these extra games in front of that home crowd?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, it's like playing on house money a little bit. We came in and didn't know if this was going to happen. Went down to Vegas after we had senior night, and they truly -- as good as a crowds are throughout the regular season, today was different. I've experienced it and I just want them all to experience how loud and exciting, and it's way better to do this in front of your own crowd than even upsetting some team.

Again, genuine -- the joy in the locker room is really special.

Q. I have to follow up about the cookies. Is this a postgame tradition after you win, that you bake cookies?

LISA FORTIER: I think they can ask for anything right now. No, it's not a tradition. I just was like, it's 10:15, they should all be in bed, but who cares. Let's do a movie. Let's get ice cream. That was what that was alluding too.

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