

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Lehigh vs Duke

Friday, March 21, 2025

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Kara Lawson

Oluchi Okananwa

Toby Fournier

Media Conference

Duke 86, Lehigh 25

KARA LAWSON: Just really proud of the defensive performance tonight. I mean, you know, 25 points, you know, two points in that second quarter I thought was -- we were at a really high level.

Even the seven points in the third we got in the bonus midway through the quarter, and four of the seven were free throws. So the way we were playing was at a high level. I thought it carried through the whole roster. No matter who was in the game they were defending at a high level.

We tried to make things difficult for them and make challenged shots. Just really impressed by the group and the defensive performance.

Q. Ladies, this question is for both of you. First time all season Lehigh has been held to single digit quarters throughout the game. What was your overall assessment of your team defense for you ladies? You haven't played since March 9th. Any concern about rust? What was the overall assessment?

OLUCHI OKANANWA: I think for us, we've done an excellent job in terms of building our culture around understanding that our defensive standard never drops.

So we haven't played since March 9th. We know what we need to put on the floor defensively every night.

TOBY FOURNIER: She answered it perfectly. This is what we strive to do. Every practice we focus on



everything, but defense especially, running all these different drills.

It paid off and it's nice that kind of transitioned from the ACC tournament even though it's been a few weeks.

Q. This is kind of a record book game for Lehigh's. That is the second fewest points scored in an NCAA tournament game. I guess what does that say about how locked in ya'll were to the defensive game plan?

OLUCHI OKANANWA: I mean, this is March. Doesn't matter who your opponent is. You address each and every one with the same intensity. For us, this is our first March Madness game and no one wants to go home so we're going to bring it all we've got.

Q. Toby, just wanted to ask you about the growth you've seen from your teammate right to the right of you there. Been on fire since specifically December coming off the bench and still able to lead the team in scoring. What's impressed you about what she's been able to do since December?

TOBY FOURNIER: I mean, I can talk for days about Luchi. I love her so much. On and off the court we have a really about connection. I'm proud of the progress she's made. I knew she could do the things she's doing right now. This is not a surprise to me.

She's always about on a spark. Like her personality on and off the court. That's what our team has been needing. Her coming off having so many points on defense, all around player, so it's really helpful for our team.

Q. No. 7, getting into the game in you fourth quarter.

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah.

Q. Hitting those two three-pointers, first of her career. I saw the bench go wild. For your team, what kind of moment was that for you?

OLUCHI OKANANWA: Coach actually just gave us a little bit of a lesson in the locker room recently. Just kind of



giving a testament to Lou in terms of always be ready when your number is called. Tonight she really showed that. She doesn't always get in many of the games, but regardless, when Coach called her name and she gets in the game she produces, whether it's setting up her teammate or knocking some shots for herself.

Q. Just going back to -- I don't know if it was the first or the second three there -- do you guys know whose towel made its way onto the court?

OLUCHI OKANANWA: No.

TOBY FOURNIER: No, we don't unfortunately. Could be anyone.

Q. Ladies, it seemed like every time a player took a charge everyone was smiling, high fiving. Talk about that camaraderie. Almost like a reflection of the coach. As soon as it happened Coach is smiling. She hardly never smiles at all, so seeing that type of transition, putting your body on the line, what does that mean?

TOBY FOURNIER: She smiles a lot behind closed doors. Not as much on the court. I got you. I'll back you up.

OLUCHI OKANANWA: You do.

TOBY FOURNIER: We put an emphasis on that, so taking a charge, it's something our team focuses on a lot. I think every game that's definitely a big part of the game for us, being able to that, and then transition on the offensive side.

Yeah, really important.

I got you. Don't worry.

Q. Toby, Oregon has a pretty good amount of size. You didn't have to deal with that as much tonight. Just going back, what are you looking for in that scout with some players that are taller than you?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, they haven't seen Oregon yet. We haven't watched -- or philosophy is focus on the team that's next. They haven't seen any film on Oregon or know any of their sets or any of their actions. They don't have a familiarity with that.

Q. Coach, before you went into this matchup, earlier I think it was Sunday when the brackets were released, you were focused on getting to this matchup, getting your players ready for this time and moment. Was there any type of concern about having that rust from March 9th, ACC championship, going into two week's layoff and then going into this matchup? Any concern

about having rust or layover?

KARA LAWSON: I think there is always a concern that you will have an uneven performance. For me it was a combination of things. It wasn't just the layoff. It was just their excited to play. I mean, so you wonder if you'll be sloppy because there is so much juice inside of them.

I thought we weren't as sharp in the first quarter as we needed to be and gave up some looks that we would have preferred not to.

So it felt like we were just trying to find our rhythm defensively in that first quarter. I thought we found it in the second quarter. I didn't think we found our rhythm offensively in the fourth. Certainly helped we made threes in the second half. I think we had one in the first half. Made ten in the second half.

But our rhythm was so much better offensively in the fourth. I thought we were rushed the first three quarters and we just had a poise and a calmness to us in the fourth.

Then we were able to see -- when you have poise and calmness you can see where the defense is. So I thought we were sharing the ball better because we were seeing it, whereas as in the first three quarters we were just scattered.

That's more the concern is can. Yeah, you're hoping the layoff there is not too much rust, but you are also hoping they're not so amped that they can still play with poise.

Q. You talked yesterday about sort of how the team had to have a little bit of fear, the possibility that something like that could happen, an upset. Just seemed like they were incredibly locked into the scouting report. Was instilling that in them, was that part of how locked in they were today to executing on the defensive end?

KARA LAWSON: I think that's something they've grown in the course the season, their ability to apply the report to the game. You know, we talk a lot about it's not enough just to know it. It's not enough to know someone's a shooter. Can you take away the shots? It's not enough to know the play call and the action. Can you, within the action, make the right play and be in the right spot?

So this group has grown through the course of the season to improve in that, which has been helpful. So I think that is definitely -- I don't want to say it's a strength of ours, but something that we're much better at in March than we were earlier in the year, having an understanding of what teams are trying to do and how they're trying to pick our defense

apart and then being able to adjust.

We have a lot of really high intelligent -- highly intelligent players, and I think that helps us. Obviously we have some athleticism and depth and all these things. Really it's their brains that allow us to play the way we play.

Everyone assumes because it's frenetic and because it can be oppressive that it's all about athleticism. It's really all about intelligence. To apply pressure over a period of time and to be disciplined enough to play means that you have to have a highly intelligent group before you have a highly athletic group. Now, when you combine those two you get some really good results.

Q. Coach, there is one moment we kind of asked the players about it earlier. I think it was second quarter. You'll have to help me remember which player it was that drew the charge. You were fired up. What were you thinking in that moment? I guess, what was it about that specific play that had you so fired up and with such a big smile on the sidelines?

KARA LAWSON: How many wonders of the world are there? Seven. I felt like I saw the eighth wonder of the world. Oluchi took a charge. Never seen that before in my life, so I was excited. When some of them do things I've never seen them do before, it was exhilarating. That's why I was so excited.

I don't think she has done that this year. Definitely a career high in charges for her with one.

Q. Coach, you obviously played seven players 20-ish minutes, and March sometimes benches get shorter. Today you were able to go all the way down the bench. Nice to see contributions from everyone on such a big stage?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I have a ten-player rotation. Obviously don't play ten every game, but I am fully confident in all ten of them. I played them all in big spots if you look back over our games. Went deeper into the bench early because we had a little bit of foul trouble, so Donovan didn't really get into the game much because she was in it foul trouble. Thomas picked up one; Toby picks up two in the first half.

So it was really more forced by that than anything else. So Woody played more minutes than anybody. That was more dictated by Donovan being in foul trouble. But they've all played critical parts for us. Our bench has played a critical role.

Obviously the stand outs from a scoring perspective are

Toby and Oluchi. If you look at our games everyone made big plays. You go to the first half of our game against Notre Dame semis in the ACC tournament, de Jesus changed that game with 7 points. Championship game against NC State, and Woody came in in critical moments and made plays for us.

So that's what you need. You need to have players that are ready to come in and make plays, because you just don't know how the game is going to go. Yeah, fully confident in all the players in our rotation. Just as the game goes along I don't come in with a preconceived set. Yeah, I just kind of go and see how people are going, and obviously fouls can come into play to change the rotation.

Q. Coach, in a survive-and-advance scenario, what's been the best way for you, and the coaches to keep the girls, ladies calm, poised, and collected, not looking down the line, focused on the team at hand knowing and any time you can go home?

KARA LAWSON: I think it's -- we've emphasized that all year, even though there is not the elimination factor all year. We emphasized putting your entire focus on the team you're playing that night. That's it. That's all that matters.

Not worrying about what possibly could be down the road. That's super hard to do in March because the brackets come out and everybody is picking these matchups and saying, I can't wait for this matchup three rounds later, and that matchup never happens because, guess what? One or both teams don't get there. Our job is to get there. That's our job. That's Oregon's job.

Both of our jobs to get to the Sweet 16. So we talked about that. I think the thing that helps me more than anything is that the tournament is going on nonstop and you see it happening on the women's side and the men's side. You see games you thought there would be a different winner and, guess what? There is not. You can't take anything for granted. Every team -- certainly every team that's left now -- I mean, we just made a big cut. I'm proud of the, 64 to 32. One of 32 teams remaining. Everybody is good and will kick your butt if you don't play well.

Our job is to play well. Not to worry about as much who we're playing. Not to worry about who we could play down the road. If we don't play well we're not going to get down the road. Going to be stuck on the side of the road hitchhiking. That's what happens when you lose in March. So we got to focus on that.

They've done a good job of it. Our whole focus 100% is on



Oregon. You know, if we don't play well they'll beat us. They're really, really good. So we have to play well. Like I said yesterday, that's how it's supposed to be.

You shouldn't get to advance if you play crappy. In what world is that fun? You should have to play well to win. So we got to play well to win in March and that's how it should be. We're both playing for a lot on the line. Playing for a chance to get to the second weekend.

I think it's going to be great game. You know, hopefully we bring our best.

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