

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Baylor vs Duke

Sunday, March 22, 2026
Durham, North Carolina, USA
Cameron Indoor Stadium

Baylor Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Bella Fontleroy

Darianna Littlepage-Buggs

Media Conference

Duke - 69, Baylor - 46

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by the Baylor Bears. We have with us head coach Nicki Collen, along with student-athletes Bella Fontleroy and Darianna Littlepage-Buggs.

NICKI COLLEN: I thought Duke started off really, really well today. I thought their pressure, combined with like really attacking the rim, I thought they had us in rotations that whole first half. I thought the second half was very different, but you don't get to play a half of basketball.

Kudos to them. They're elite on the offensive glass. But I thought Delaney Thomas got them off to a really good start and then kind of made it easier for them.

Proud of the way we battled in the second half, but couldn't get away from that second quarter.

Q. Buggs, what do you think caused the early shooting struggles? Was it Duke? Was it you not getting in a rhythm? What was the early struggle?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: I think, like she said, it was their pressure a little bit. We needed to handle it a little better. They deterred us from shots. We're shooting up shots that maybe we could have gotten a better look at. We didn't really lock down on that and kind of settle in.

Q. Bella, it seems like defensively -- I don't want that to get overlooked because you all held them to four 3s, really good defensive game. On the other side they got the ball. What were they doing that was difficult for



you all to get shots up, especially from 3-point?

BELLA FONTLEROY: They're long. They're a long, athletic group of girls. They play really hard. Like Buggs said, they had a lot of pressure. It disrupted our timing and spacing on things that we usually get easier, things we got easier the first time around.

Also, they're really physical. So we didn't get a lot of second chance points either because it was a point of emphasis to box and make sure we weren't getting second chance opportunities.

Q. Bella, what kind of legacy do you hope the senior class left, and where does Baylor go from here?

BELLA FONTLEROY: I think that anyone who is a Baylor fan, especially a women's basketball fan, should continue to stick with this program and see what Coach Nicki and Coach Tony and the rest of the staff does.

Our lives are changed for the better because we came through here as not only players but as humans. I have in the past four years grown up. I know how to take care of myself and other people around me any way that they need. I've learned to show up every day even whenever I don't feel like it and put my best foot forward. Just very thankful for that.

If you're a fan and you watch and you interact and you become a donor or you become someone who follows us and travels with us, you see the inside of what it's like to be a Baylor women's basketball player and what it's like to be loved on and a part of this family.

Q. Buggs, they had an advantage rebounding-wise. How tough was it down there to try to grab some of those rebounds? What was their advantage?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: It was really tough. They're really long, that's their advantage. They disrupt a lot at the rim. Nothing's easy down there. You don't have an easy layup. You have to kind of get the ball moving to get good looks.



Yeah, it was their length. We just struggled with that tonight.

Q. Nicki, just back on the topic of Duke, did they do anything specifically that surprised you, or was that just you guys not being able to stay up to task?

NICKI COLLEN: Great question. I think -- you know, I'm not sure the first game of the year that they didn't top block Taliah. I think they did a good job of keeping it out of her hands if we didn't start with it there. They'd lock and trail on baseline screens, are floppy, but they're really committed. They didn't make a lot of mistakes. They're hard to screen.

I think Jackson and Mair are really physical when they're chasing off screens. We couldn't totally shake them. I think that impacted us.

I don't think we trusted the pass enough early. Like I thought we were trying to make plays when we needed to screen and move the ball. I think that's where we got ourselves in trouble.

I thought, when you look at the fourth quarter, we started to -- not that -- because Kara was going to lose her mind every time they scored. It wasn't like they let up. I just think we got to a more comfortable understanding of, hey, they're going to switch on step-ups. We can play to the high-low. If they take away the high-low, we're going to have two-on-one on the back side.

We settled in, and we weren't frantic. I thought we were frantic against their pressure early. When I look at them down the stretch, I thought their pressure was really amped up from what I saw, even in the ACC Tournament. I just really thought the pressure that Jackson and Mair brought on the perimeter was excellent. Then their ball screen coverage, they were there all night. They didn't make a lot of mistakes in their ball screen coverage.

We needed to get to the step-ups because they were switching them. So we had an advantage there. Yeah, their length bothered us at the rim. Buggs missed a couple shots she normally makes just being rushed. Then when you get an offensive rebound under there, it's just hard to get it back up on the rim because they're long at the 3, 4, 5, and sometimes the 2, 3, 4, 5 if they've got Wood at the 3 and Nelson at the 2.

Q. You don't score for the first five minutes of the game, then you call that timeout. What did you say in that timeout, and how disappointing was it to turn it over on a five second call coming out of that timeout?

NICKI COLLEN: It wasn't great. Baseline out of bounds, I think that they do a good job of X'g out with their inbound defender and switching when they need to switch. You've got to -- we were more successful when we played over the top. When we tried to screen back to the ball, we were going to have problems because they X out.

You've got to read slips and stuff on that. You don't see a lot of that. I don't know that that -- that for me wasn't the disappointing part. I thought our ability to just hang onto the ball, like just -- you know, we had people open, but our head was down and we were over dribbling, and we missed opportunities to make plays.

They won the game in the second quarter. I thought we could sustain what happened in the first quarter, but the second quarter, we took tough shots. We didn't have enough people back. So they got in transition because we weren't necessarily back.

You combine that -- I thought it took one breakdown by one person on every possession. It might have been the same person more than once, but it was just -- I thought what Duke did phenomenally well, and in particular in that second quarter, was we call it advantage throw. We create an advantage, and you just kind of keep -- we're scrambling around.

We were a cat chasing their tail because they beat us on a back cut, we'd rotate to the back cut, they'd kick it to the open person. Then we'd be trying to rematch, and then they would reattack, and eventually it would end up with a wide open 3. Chances were they were going to miss the open 3 because they didn't make a lot of them. Even their good shooters were missing them.

But now you're scrambling in rotation with mismatches, and then they beat you on the glass and you foul them or you -- I just felt like we were one step behind most of those defensive possessions. Whether it was because we were in transition because of a turnover or because of a shot, a tough shot that was like a turnover, a blocked shot or whatever.

Just I thought they played with an advantage at the offensive end. It wasn't the set. It was the denial to the back cut. It was the getting beat on the baseline to the rotation, that type of thing, more than it was an actual set. Although I thought they executed their sets well.

Q. I'm wondering if in the next couple weeks you get calls from WNBA coaches asking you about Bella or Buggs --

NICKI COLLEN: Whew, thanks. I didn't think that's where

you were going. So I appreciate it, yeah.

Q. About Bella or Buggs and how they might fit in the league, that sort of thing, what will your pitches to them be for those two players?

NICKI COLLEN: I think every team needs a Buggs. Buggs' game isn't necessarily like this, but my most successful years in the league, Blake Dietrick was on my team. There's a player -- I don't -- look, Blake was an elite Ivy player, but there weren't a lot of people who understood how great Blake was, but every team needs a Darianna Littlepage-Buggs because she doesn't have a bad day.

She's going to get better. Like she's gotten better every year. I wish they could see how well she shoots the 3 now. It hasn't become the shot that she leans into. Like I thought she turned on a couple today and tried to drive it, and probably it's because we weren't shooting the 3 very well, so she didn't want to take a 3. I think she's improved her 3-point range. It's her heart. She's all about team, and she's impossible to keep off the boards.

Because of that, you just know -- you need -- every team needs someone like that. People didn't know why I kept Blake Dietrick the first year. But we went to the Eastern Conference Finals, and if Blake played 2 minutes or 20 minutes or didn't get in, she was going to be talking to her teammates on the bench. She was going to be ready. She was going to give us energy in practice.

I think Buggs is going to end up being more than that, but I just think the intangibles she brings, I would want. Like I watched her tryout for that AmeriCup team that Kara coached this summer, when I watched all those players out there, the Mikayla Blakes and whatever, I'm like they need a Buggs. That team, she doesn't need to score 20, but she's going to go score 6 and grab you seven rebounds if you play her 15 minutes.

I think Bella, her numbers don't say this this year, but I think Bella has an elite basketball IQ and can be a 3 and D player in that league and guard multiple positions. She has the physical tools to play in that league. She has the body. When Bella wants to rebound, nobody does it better. She's strong, the strongest player on our team, second highest vertical on our team. She's just -- she's built for the league body-wise.

I think she's a no brainer if she's making 3s. I think it's been a tough go. The ball hasn't fallen for her this year, but I think that's what she can be at that level.

Great question. Thanks for not asking me if I'm leaving. Usually when somebody asks me a WNBA question --

Q. I'm not asking if you're leaving.

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I'm not.

Q. But where does Baylor go from here as a program? You're losing three or four or five starters to graduation. What in a perfect world, where do you go from here? Where does Baylor go?

NICKI COLLEN: We go to the portal like everybody else in America. It's the way our game has changed. Veteran teams win.

I think we've got some holes. We've got to get playmaking guards. We've got to be able to get a piece of the paint. We obviously have swing players that we're going to miss. So we go to the portal.

We've had really great success there, and we're going to continue to recruit both high school and the portal, but I think right now that's where we go.

I feel good about what I think we have to sell and plan to win 25 or more games next year and hopefully be hosting, and this can be at Foster instead of at Cameron Indoor.

Today Duke was the better team and deserves to advance. They're going to be a hard out for anybody because they defend. When it comes to March, your ability to get stops is the most important thing no matter who you play or where you play. So this team has a chance to finish the season the same way people thought they were going to start the season.

For me I'm not always big on today being about next year. It's just kind of been something I've told my team at the end of every year. I don't challenge the group, the returners today. Today is the last day that this team gets to be together in the locker room. So to me it's always about this team and what this team meant, what this senior group meant.

Buggs and Bella, they're just really, really special to me. They were the first kids that said yes in a post-Mulkey era. Like they just have a different place in my heart because, before I had a win as a college coach, they said yes. It wasn't an easy act to follow, and it wasn't easy for them to walk into a fire.

I'm forever grateful for those kids and Kyla. I mean, when I think about when Jana came -- and I have just as much respect and love for her, but she came after a conference championship, like we had proven that we knew what we were doing.

But Buggs, Bella, and Kyla, they just knew I was the WNBA coach of the year. So they believed that I could make Baylor special for them. Today's about them. So thank you.

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