

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - George Mason vs Florida State

Friday, March 21, 2025

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Pete Maravich Assembly Center

## George Mason Patriots Vanessa Blair-Lewis Paula Suarez Nalani Kaysia

Media Conference

**Q. As a graduate student on this team, talk about the journey to get here. I know you all had from the start to January to mid-February, you only lost two games. Talk about that portion of the season and how that catapulted you to where you are today.**

NALANI KAYSIA: We were just in a flow, really playing our style of basketball, being able to score at will and stop people defensively. I will also say that in that time in the games we did lose, I almost think it was necessary for us to lose them so we could really know what we need to work on coming down this last stretch when it really mattered.

**Q. Paula, talk about your thoughts on getting to the tournament knowing that this was potentially your first NCAA Tournament for the program, the way you all won so convincingly in the tournament, the confidence that built you up to find out you were coming to Baton Rouge?**

PAULA SUÁREZ: Yeah, I think we were all super locked in. We were all on the same page having fun out there. We played our best basketball all season, but it just all clicked because we wanted to win so bad.

**Q. You earned the most improved player - congratulations on that. What do you feel improved from last year to this year to earn that honor?**

PAULA SUÁREZ: I think just in my confidence, just being relaxed when I'm out there playing and just trying to be the best player I can be for my team to be the best leader and the best player I can be.



**Q. Nalani, what did you see from her improvement?**

NALANI KAYSIA: I call P my Spanish cookbook. She can really play basketball. She's a great basketball player, and sometimes she lets girls off the hook by not being aggressive and I think she finally tuned into being aggressive and scoring and knowing that people cannot guard her.

**Q. For either of you, you guys have been boots on the ground now for about 12 hours. I'm curious what your initial impressions are of Baton Rouge and what it's like just seeing all the March Madness logos and seeing games going on and knowing you're a part of that.**

NALANI KAYSIA: I can take it. Like you said, we've really only been here 12 hours and we got in kind of late last night to truly explore. But honestly being in our hotel room and being able to watch the NCAA games and reaming we're going to be a part of that coming soon has been extremely surreal for me personally. I don't know about for my teammates. But this is going to be us on TV tomorrow playing in March Madness.

PAULA SUÁREZ: Yeah, it just feels like really good. Like watching the games and knowing that we're going to be there, not the same as watching it and knowing that your season is over or something like that. It's just really exciting.

**Q. For either or both of you, how much has your bench helped you this season in ways that maybe don't even show up on the stat sheet? How much do you think it'll continue to help you in the NCAA Tournament? PAULA SUÁREZ: They've been really helpful, like, with just bringing a lot of energy, and like you said, things that don't show up on the stat sheet, not everything about scoring. Just coming in and helping a lot on defense, bringing that spark off the bench has been really helpful.**

NALANI KAYSIA: I would also add that in practice it's helpful going against them every day. They have been really intentional about trying to get the starters better day



in and day out, and it might not show up when we actually play, but it really adds up over time.

**Q. Just following up, is there any one or two people that have stood out to you in practice over the last couple of weeks as you've gone on your postseason run?**

NALANI KAYSIA: I think that Page Greenburg and Faith Okorie have really been working extremely hard in practice and making us better, making us play defense, making us work on our offense, just day in and day out, just playing and giving 110 percent and working extremely hard even when people aren't in the gym and even when we weren't practicing.

PAULA SUÁREZ: Yeah, I think everyone has been like on their A game, just really excited. We got an opportunity to keep playing so everyone is playing their best basketball and playing really hard in practice.

**Q. What are the keys for you against Florida State, and Paula, it's been said you resemble Caitlin Clark.**

PAULA SUÁREZ: I've heard that before. Just be ourselves, be confident. Like, we play our best basketball when we're just having fun out there. I don't think we have any pressure. We're just here, and it's a new experience. We're just out here to have fun and compete for 40 minutes.

NALANI KAYSIA: Just to piggyback off P, being confident, knowing that we deserve to be here, and we're going to show up and put our best foot forward, and just knowing that we are good basketball players and showing that we are.

**Q. For both of you, how have you seen head coach Vanessa Blair-Lewis impact your lives and transform this program in her fourth year here?**

PAULA SUÁREZ: I think just the record shows her from being the last in conference when she came in to four years after winning the conference. The amount of -- like, how much has changed in four years is crazy, and not just like the numbers. Also, like the culture of the team. You can feel from when I came in to right now, like, the culture is so much different. Everyone who comes in, there's such a great vibe and such a family vibe in the team.

NALANI KAYSIA: I can say for me personally, she has really grown my faith. We're a faith-based team and coaching staff. Just seeing her walk by faith and just really put God first in everything has helped me grow just as a grown woman, and knowing that I would be nothing without

Him and just taking it day in and day out with that mindset.

**Q. We last spoke on Sunday. Now that it's been a few days to sink in the matchup, I'm curious what the mindset was this week in practice leading up to this game and what your mindset is heading into tomorrow.**

NALANI KAYSIA: Our mindset going into every practice has been the most important game is the game next up. But obviously, this is win or go home. So all practices have been focused on is just compete, compete, compete. Even if mistakes are made in practice, even if things might not go 100 percent right, we have to be able to compete against our practice squad or our own teammates because that's what it's going to come down to tomorrow.

PAULA SUÁREZ: Yeah, it's like Lani said, just go out there and compete. It doesn't matter who we're playing, we've just got to focus on ourselves and play our game.

**Q. For either player or both of you, when you look back on the A-10 tournament, was there something you felt like your team did at a higher level in the tournament than you did before that and that needs to stay at that level against Florida State?**

PAULA SUÁREZ: I think our energy, like how we were celebrating and everything. Like if you watch those games, we were just -- every single little thing that happened everyone celebrated. It didn't matter who scored, it didn't matter who was getting stops. We were all really together, and I think that's what made us win.

NALANI KAYSIA: I don't want to repeat what Paula just said, but being a team, playing as a team, just knowing that when your number is called, you show up ready to play. Then whoever is getting it done for us, just continue to do that. We're as a team extremely happy for each other.

**Q. Coach, how about some thoughts on the year and the path this team took to where you are here in Baton Rouge.**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: We are more than excited to be here. It has been worth the trip. For us as a staff, we've built this program four years ago with the intention of being right here. Each year, we've built to be here. To be able to take that jump this year, winning the A-10 conference championship to be here is really exciting for this program, something that's never been done before. We're excited to be the first.

**Q. The players were asked about the journey. Certainly, somebody believed in the vision you've**



**given them to get to this point, and they were asked what you mean to them. I want to ask you what these players have meant to you to put together this vision of we're not going to be 0-14 anymore and last year the postseason and this year your first NCAA bid.**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: They mean everything to us. They are a resilient group of young women who, four years ago, we asked them to believe in something that was probably impossible at the time to even see because there was no evidence of it. They're a family. So especially for the players like Paula, who have been with us through the entire journey of the four years of the ups and the downs and the climb. And then you have Lani, who's joined in in that. It's really good for them to be honored this way, to go out this way as champions.

**Q. Last year you make the WBIT, just the fourth postseason ever, and now you make the jump to the NCAA. What would last year's postseason experience, how can that experience help you this year, because they talked about watching games on TV, seeing the banner, realizing, they're here. How do you think last year's experience can help this year?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Yeah, I think it's really good. Anytime you get a chance to play beyond the scheduled games and give your girls that opportunity and experience to play in a venue, and we did a great job. We went up to Penn State and gave them everything that we had, and I think that was what carried us into the summer and into this year, that we were able to tie our shoes up against a Big Ten opponent and almost came out with that victory.

To be hungry this year, to come back to this point, to get to that championship game and to win it, I think they understand what postseason is like. It's another season. Everybody's record is 0-0, just like when you go into your conference tournament. Everybody's record is 0-0. It really doesn't matter so much as to your X's and O's. I think all that comes into play, but it's a mindset when you get here. You have to be in the mindset that we're here not to just show up for the party and dance, but we want to keep the shoes on well past midnight.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned during the conference tournament that Page Greenburg really stepped up and said she was going to be the X-factor. Overall, how has the bench helped you this season, and who do you expect to step up off the bench in this NCAA Tournament?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I think I expect all of them to. They're all dressed. We all have a belief in our team well past the first starting five, and we've needed that all season

with injuries and sickness and all the things that go on in a season. Everybody has been charged to stay ready and be ready for these moments, not just Page but Faith and Trinity Massenburg, Nekhu Mitchell, all of them. They all have had their role and their time during this season to step up and be accountable for us so that this team can continue to move on no matter who's on the floor.

**Q. Coach, you guys have played multiple Power Five opponents already this season. You actually have a winning record against the ACC, the Big East and took Big Ten down to the wire in Maryland. Does that give you guys a certain degree of confidence heading into tomorrow, or is it just, hey, this is the next opponent?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I think it's both. I think that they want to play these games. They talk with Coach Bolton, our scheduling coach all the time. They're like, put this team on the schedule, put this team on the schedule, we want to play them. So this year to get out there and play the Wake Forests and the Georgetowns and to be victorious and Maryland twice -- two years in a row to be able to hold them to under 10 -- a loss under 10 points when we had a lead, they're ready. They're primed for a game like this. They don't want to, like I said, show up and just put on dancing shoes for one day. They want to keep dancing, and they believe that they can.

**Q. Going off of that, taking another step back to the A-10 tournament, what's something you felt like your team did at a higher level than they had previously and that needs to stay at that level coming up against Florida State tomorrow night?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: I think they play with a sense of togetherness. I think they all knew where each other's good things would shine in a game like we did against St. Joe's.

I think they understand what the strength is of this team, and it's everybody, and everybody can contribute. I think when they play that way -- we have three-level scorers, we have two-level scorers. Everybody has a different part to play in this puzzle that we put together, and they know how good they can be when it all comes together.

I believe I've said all year that when it all clicks, it's going to be really, really special, and we've had that moment in the tournament, and I think that's where we started to play our best basketball. We played some really good basketball, but in the conference tournament is where we really put all the puzzle pieces together. Everybody got a chance to take part in that victory.

**Q. Do you try to talk to your players almost, to quote**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**the Hoosiers movie, it's still the same court, still the same height of the rim? How will you talk to them about putting all that excitement aside and just get back to playing basketball? It's just another game against another ACC opponent. What will your message be to the team to put that over-excitement away?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Yeah, we've talked about that. I think they're excited to see all the signage and everything because it's exciting to be here. Not everybody gets invited to this party, so that excitement is real, and it should be, and it's a first-class event, and you want to be here. We've been at the other tournament, right, and that was great, but now you've made it to where you believe big enough that you can be on this stage.

I think once we hit the floor, you'll see that team that we've seen every single day of the season. Not that it's just another game, but this is the game that's important.

**Q. This is obviously George Mason's first time in the NCAA Tournament, but this is not your first time in the NCAA Tournament. I'm curious how you see similarities and differences between your runs at Bethune-Cookman and this particular group?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Well, I think I remember last time when we got to the tournament at Bethune-Cookman, we were matched up with Notre Dame, and there were several reporters wanting to know what and how I was going to beat Notre Dame. And so, I calmly said, let's stop asking that question. They have 10 McDonald's All-Americans. At that time, we had 10 kids that liked to eat at McDonald's. (Laughter).

When you talk about this now, I don't think that's the team that we brought here. The team we brought here is a team that, yeah, they might like to eat at McDonald's, but they like to play basketball, too, and they believe big enough that they can be on this stage and they can win.

**Q. I'd like to ask you about your relationship with Florida State's coach. She shared with us that she had started a coaches with children organization. She said she hasn't talked to you yet, but she looked forward to seeing you game day. Can you share from your point of view your relationship with her since you'll be squaring off tomorrow?**

VANESSA BLAIR-LEWIS: Yeah, we spent 13 years in Florida, and we played against them several times. We're not new to each other, but off the court, Brooke is an amazing human being. She shared a podcast and still operates it, coaching while being a mom, really. She's had

me on the show several times, and we're sometimes on the road pushing our strollers, still doing all the things that you have to do as a coach. And just being able to lean into someone else that is going through what you're going through, you're trying to show your team, trying to show your players that you can have it all, you can be a great wife, you can be a great mom, and you can still be a great leader and a coach, and that's what she tries to push on her podcast.

Brooke is a talented young woman. She was very loyal to Coach Sue Semrau for years, and now she's gotten her opportunity, and they weren't wrong. She's done an amazing job. I look forward to seeing her tomorrow, as well.

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