

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Liberty vs Kentucky

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Memorial Coliseum

Kentucky Wildcats Coach Kenny Brooks

Media Conference



to feel each other out, they're trying to feel me out. They were very quiet in the way they went about their business. It was well documented I talked about them needing a little bit more personality in the way that they went about their business.

And mission accomplished. They have lots of personality. They're a lot of fun to be around. I think we did a video yesterday, and Georgia busted out the backwards worm. But we have so many different personalities that mesh very well together.

And the chemistry is not just what you see on the court, it's also in a locker room. It's also when we go on road trips. And all of that has a big play into what we do because when they're talking and communicating and understanding and trusting each other and having and exuding personality, it shows on the court. And they play with emotion, and they play with confidence, not only themselves but in each other. And that's been a big part of our success this year.

Q. Coach, tomorrow you're facing a team that has led in scoring by a formidable post. Can you talk about that front court matchup and what you're looking for, seeing from your posts?

KENNY BROOKS: I think they're different in styles. I remember Smuda, we played against her a few years ago. She was a baby at that point. I remember saying then I thought she was going to be a pretty good player for them.

Carey does a good job, Katie, with developing post players. We've seen that before. And just not seeing her for a couple years and then watching her this year when we started to scout against her, you can see her development. She presents some challenges for us.

I know she's a great rim protector, but she's also active on the offensive end. She's not just an immobile post player, she can put a ball on the floor enough where she needs to and attack the basket. And she plays with an aggression that if you're not ready that play early defense, she can get you in foul trouble.

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to Coach Kenny Brooks' press conference. Questions for head coach Kenny Brooks.

Q. Now that you guys had some time to regroup, some rest, what are the things that you're seeing out of your team that you're liking from the rest?

KENNY BROOKS: They have pop. Obviously with the time off, it's needed after a grueling SEC schedule, but also grueling SEC finish. And it was very physical game the last time we went out. We played against Oklahoma. And this time off it's much needed. They were able to rest a little bit, rest their brains, rest their bodies.

They've come back. And you've just seen a different type of energy. I think a lot of it has to do with the physical part of it, but also the mental. Their excitement heading to the NCAA Tournament. They had a chance to reflect on pretty much a lot of the things that they accomplished this year.

And so going into this year, this week, it's just been a renewed energy. They've had a lot of energy in practice. They've been really good, talking, communicating. So it's been a really good week and a half for us to have off.

Q. Just to sort of feed off of that, one of the first things you said before the season started was you wanted this group to grow in personality. I know it doesn't seem like the most important thing to talk about when you talk about the game on the floor. But I asked Georgia where is the biggest area you've grown, and she said personality. How much fun has it been to see this group get to know each other and you can see that on the court?

KENNY BROOKS: It's been a tremendous experience because when you put together a new group, they're trying

So very impressed with her, her development, but not surprised by it because we saw it when she was very young. And we know that it can be an issue for us.

Q. You talked a little bit about that 2021 game. Do you have any more memories of that? I know they have a couple holdovers other than Bella Smuda. Do you remember anything from that night? Do you remember anything that might be able to help you with your former clashes with Liberty's Coach Green?

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, Carey does a good job. We've had battles. I've played against him a lot when I was at James Madison. I've played against him a lot when we were at Virginia Tech. And then obviously getting an opportunity this year.

And you can look at that game, you can always look at whatever game and try to figure some things out. But we're a totally different team than we were then. That game, it was an emotional game. We had Emily Lytle on our squad, and she was coming back to Liberty. So that was part of it.

I do remember we played that game, we played Tennessee on a Sunday, and then played that game on a Tuesday. And I remember thinking that was terrible scheduling by me. But it was a game that we did not play well. We remember that. But it was a game that jump started us because we learned some things about our team and that situation.

So going into this game, I don't think that game has any bearing on what happens tomorrow. But we also know the importance of the game. And we know their style, we know -- I know Carey and a lot of the things that he wants to do. And so, yeah, I watched that game, but I don't know how much we can pull from it because it's two totally different basketball teams.

Q. You talked about that grueling SEC finish, two of them were top 15 opponents here in this building, but it had a great atmosphere, and you're bringing that here with March Madness with this game. How do you hope that you guys with the rest and the energy and the atmosphere can capitalize off of that?

KENNY BROOKS: That stretch that we had, everybody wanted to point to it, and they almost looked at it as gloom and doom, like it was going to be the end of our success or development.

And although we're not into moral victories, you look at that game -- like we played Texas, and Texas is one of the best teams in the country. And although we didn't win it, we

were winning when Clara Strack went out with foul trouble with eight minutes to go in the first half. We had LSU. LSU, we were down one with two minutes to go. Then we get on the road, and we're at South Carolina, and with four minutes to go, we're done one.

We're not into moral victories, but what we proved to ourselves if we play and play the right way, we can play with anyone.

So I think that gave us a lot of confidence in what we can do if we go out and we execute and we go out and we play the way we know we can play for 40 minutes. And those games we played well enough to win for 38, for 35. And so we know we have to put it all together and every possession counts.

So even though it was grueling, it was taxing on us physically, I think mentally we came out of it knowing that we can be one of elite teams not only in our league but in the country if we play 40 minutes of good basketball.

So I think we learned a lot from that, we really did. I talk about not being into moral victories, but I think we learned a lot, and we gained some confidence because of what we had to endure going down the stretch.

Q. I just talked to a few of your players that said one of the reasons they feel ready for March is the culture that you've been able to build here. How much do you see the culture that you've been trying to build here all year reflected in this team and their preparedness?

KENNY BROOKS: Well, those two young women that came in here and spoke to you guys, they're a big reason for it. And we preach culture. We talked about it, and when you head into this day and age with the freedom of movement with the transfer portal, you still have to do your due diligence and you have to get players.

And we go in and look for players who are going to fit what we want to accomplish. And we went in, and I've often said that we don't try to get the best player, we try to get the right player. And those two young ladies and what they were able to accomplish and their leadership set the foundation for our culture.

And even though we had 11 new players coming in, we were trying to build something that was going to be sustainable and not just build a great team, we wanted to help build a great program.

And the way that they have led, I couldn't have asked for better leadership in year one to do that, to accomplish that goal.

And they have different styles, but they feed off of each other. Georgia obviously has a cheat code because she's been with me for I think 22 years, but she knows me inside and out. If I say this, she can interpret it, and she can explain it to the rest of the group.

And then D-Law has come in, and she's a consummate teammate. She will come out, she will do anything and everything to help the team. The way that she sacrificed. She got to shoot every time she touched it when she was at UNC Charlotte, and the way she came in and blended in so she could be an integral part to what we've done and not just the part is very, very impressive.

And she's done it with a smile on her face. She's a great leader of women, a great leader of people. She can come in and read a room and light it up within minutes. If you haven't seen it, go look at her commercials. I've never had A&W shrimp, but I want to go get some because of the way she ate that shrimp. She sold it. I don't know if it was good or not, but I want to go get some.

But that's the way she leads our program. And both of them have led in a way that has helped us develop culture. And when you can get culture, and they're willing to sacrifice a little bit of themselves for the betterment of the team, then you're going to be able to win some basketball games.

And that's why we were able to come together so quickly. And if you look at it, we -- when we signed the last kid in May, I thought to myself, man, we've got a pretty good team. And I thought we had a top 10 team, I really did, on paper. And then we had two injuries that could have been devastating. But we had time to reinvent ourselves, and we're able to reinvent ourselves over the summer and into the fall because of the leadership of those two young women and the way that they've done it.

So I'll forever be indebted to both of them. We all learned how to be Wildcats at the same time, but they helped that situation just because of the way that they led and they're so unselfish and just they've left a legacy that will last longer than the year that they were here.

Q. What message have you given in the locker room heading into this tournament?

KENNY BROOKS: The message is you have to take it one game at a time. We've done that this year. And we've been pretty good at it. If you look at our scouts, a lot of times on scouts, teams will put a motivational quote on before every scout. And they're cool, but the kids read them and they don't really understand it after they've read

it.

But what we've done the last couple years is every day we put on there: Go 1-0. Go 1-0. So if you can just focus on the moment. You can't look at the brackets. Don't fill out a bracket. Don't look down to see what happens second round, third round. You have to finish every moment.

And women's basketball has gotten to the point where parity is real. And you can look at it, and we're a 4 seed and Liberty is a 13 seed. They're not. They're a good basketball team. You're not a 13 seed if you've 26 games, whatever it is. They're a good basketball team, and they can come in here and they can beat you.

And so you lock in and focus. Leading up to today, we've tried to just have a great practice. Don't worry about anything else. Just have a great practice today. And I told them at this point, you can't be good because good can get you sent home. You have to be great every day. Practice. Media session. You got to be great in everything that you do at this point so that you can advance. And I think that's something that we've learned from our experiences in the past.

Q. You mentioned the culture on the team, and obviously Georgia, Dazia, Clara, they've getting most of the headlines, but when we leave a basketball game and we're talking about the numbers they put up, who do you know that if you took off this team, they would not be as good a group as they are that maybe don't get the attention that those do?

KENNY BROOKS: It's all of them. And I'm not trying to give a politically correct answer. Obviously Georgia is the head, you know, and we need her in order for us to be successful. But every one of them, they have -- they have their role. They have their niche in what's going to be extremely important to us.

And you look at our starting five, like talk about Dazia's leadership, but also her shot-making ability. Her ability to handle the basketball so it can relieve some of the pressure off of Georgia is invaluable. We need that. Her making the extra pass.

Teonni Key. You can go back and you can look. When Teonni Key plays well, we play well. And we need her production and need her consistency because she adds something that is very, very unique to women's basketball. You have a 6'4" supposed to be a post player, but she can grab a rebound and go coast-to-coast and get a layup in a fashion that looks as pretty as any guard. She rebounds the basketball once a game a more, she'll go get a rebound, and I think she's about to touch the rafters

because she's so long.

Clara Strack. Clara Strack is a Defensive Player of the Year for a reason. She anchors our defense for a reason. She talks, she communicates, she makes plays, and she's also probably the best passing post player in the country. The way that she reads defenses and does so many different things for us for us. She scores at a very unique clip because it's not just low block, it's like she's all around the floor and been able to score. So it's hard to guard.

And then you have Amelia Hasset. She had a really good year for us. Sometimes we focus on what she didn't do down the stretch, but when you've had to guard the best player on the other team for a whole year, maybe something is going to get sacrificed. Maybe you don't have legs to shoot. But when she's playing well, if she hits two, three four threes in a game, we're pretty much unbeatable. So we need everyone.

And then you look at our bench. Our bench hasn't had as much production, and you look at Liberty's bench, they're deep. It seems they have player after player after player, and they come in and contribute. We don't have that. But our bench is getting better. They're a little bit inconsistent because someday it might be Clara Silva who comes in and is really good for us. Someday it might be Lexi Blue, someday it might be Saniah Tyler. But we need somebody's production.

So I just talked for about two minutes and did not answer your question. That's what coaches do really well. But to answer your -- it would be like you asking me which one of my daughters is my favorite. I would probably talk about two minutes and not even the question. But we need them all.

Q. Coach, we asked Georgia and Dazia kind of about what it means to host and having the home crowd here for these first couple games. And Georgia even said that having a home crowd kind of pushed them over the hump for a few games, having that loud environment. How big is it to have the home crowd here, and what's your pitch to Big Blue Nation to come out tomorrow?

KENNY BROOKS: It's extremely important. I've gone through steps in the NCAA Tournament. I remember when I was at James Madison, I didn't even know what the seed meant. I was just happy we were in.

And then the more we got in, you start to say, okay, well, if we're a better seed, we get a better matchup. And when we got to Virginia Tech, again, a little bit is very happy to be in, then we had a couple tough games, we want to

improve our seed.

Then we got to the point where we were hosting. And then it was like, oh, this is an advantage. And you're able to feed off of your home crowd. You're able to have some familiarity with the surroundings more so than your opponent. And you play better.

And we've developed a relationship with Big Blue Nation. I think that they really like what we do. It's a fun style of basketball. They come out and supported us. And they made us better. And I've often said a fan base can make a good team great.

So we need Big Blue Nation to come out, be loud. We're going to need every bit of it. We say home court advantage is at least worth eight points, and we're going to need everyone against Liberty because they're a good basketball team, very unique in what they run. And how they run it is very different than what we've seen the last 17 or 18 games.

So we're going to need that extra oomph to get over the top. To fight to get a top 4 seed, it means something. It means something. It gives you an advantage. So we're going to need to really pull off.

There's a lot of things going on in Lexington this weekend, but I don't think anything is as exciting as being here and historic Memorial cheering on your Wildcats. So I know there's another tournament going on over there, but we don't like those teams over there anyway.

(Laughter.)

So come on over here. Be loud, be proud. Help a good team be great, and hopefully we can advance each day.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach.

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