

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Fairfield vs Kansas State

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Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Memorial Coliseum

**Fairfield Stags**

**Coach Carly**

**Thibault-DuDonis**

Media Conference



CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: I don't know that the message is different. Our approach isn't necessarily different. I think we built on what we did last year where the situation may feel, you know, we've been here before. But since we sat in the locker room at Indiana a year ago, that team committed to coming back together. They committed to doing more and not just getting to the tournament but taking another step.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach Carly Thibault-DuDonis.

**Q. Your players were just talking about how much of a family feel this is and how this core group all chose to come back and play another year here. What do you love most about being the head coach at Fairfield?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: I don't know how much time we have. I could go on for a little while. You heard them talk about how it is a family-oriented place. But we get great young women who care about the place, the people, their academics, the entire experience that comes with being a student-athlete in college. And so we have women that not only care about their experience, but they care about each other.

I get to coach women who love what they do, love who they do it with, and it really does make it more than just about winning basketball games. Ultimately that's our goal, but the bonds that they've created together, the way that they show up every day, and, of course, they're 18 -- in Iza's case, 25-year-old women.

They're not always going to have great days all the time but they always have teammates willing to pick them up. They're a great group to coach. Even I roll my eyes here and there a couple times a day. But I love getting up every day to go coach them every single day.

**Q. It's been a long year, but again this is a very similar situation that you were in last year. Neutral court. Is the message different this year than it has been in the past, and especially at a neutral site, or is it the same message of just go out and play Fairfield basketball?**

So since that day, and truthfully since the spring and summer, we've used the number 33. We were in the game with Indiana until the middle of the third quarter, it was a five-point game. Then they blew that lead open to 33. They won by 33. We've used the number 33 in shooting drills, competitive practices, in drills you have to win by three. You have to get three stops, whatever it is. You get a plus 3 for taking care of the basketball.

And these are things to remind us to, A, not be complacent with what we did last year, and B, know that we have to close the gap to do what we ultimately want to do at Fairfield to win NCAA games. As a staff we went to work recruiting to fill some of the holes of those who graduated, areas we needed to get better.

Our team's worked incredibly hard. We've improved a lot in what we do. And our goal is again everybody that came back this year and all the newbies that joined us were, we don't want to -- we know we have to win the MAAC and that's the ultimate goal every year but we want to take it further.

**Q. If you could talk a little bit about the importance of Iza to the program from the leadership perspective and how you've seen her develop in this season too?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: She's my first-ever recruit to Fairfield. We call her the OG for a lot of reasons. And she believed in this before this was a thing, before she knew what it was going to look like and how it was going to feel.

I'm really proud of her growth. We got her when she was four years into college, really, already but hadn't played a big role for Florida State. She had two ACLs and had a



hard time recovering to play at the ACC level at that point.

She kind of went through all stages of things in her career at Fairfield so far, where the first year she was so happy to be on the court, so happy to score the ball again, to shoot the ball again, and we needed her to. That team was a little offensively challenged that first year. We needed her to shoot and try and score.

The second year she really grew into a facilitator a pass-first point guard. Sometimes to our detriment where we needed her to score.

She's been able to put it all together this year where she's done both, taking the care of the ball at an impressive level, one of the best in the country, aggressively looking to score when we needed to her. But I think the thing that probably doesn't show up in stats is how she shows up. She has just a joy for the game. She never takes it for granted. She had it taken away from her with ACLs. She's such an example how she walks the walk every day.

She doesn't take practice for granted, doesn't take a drill for granted.

There's times I'm telling her to take fewer reps. She's like, no, I want to win, in a 2-on-2 warm-up drill. That bleeds into everybody on the roster how she loves the game and the feel.

**Q. Offensively you run a unique system where you try and push the pace and shoot a lot of 3s and then play a little bit more five out. What was the thought process behind that and how has that sort of helped you guys when you have to play tougher non-conference games?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: It's something that even before I was a head coach, it's a style of play I always admired. When I was at Minnesota there were a ton of teams in the midwest area that did that. Creighton and Drake and South Dakota State and South Dakota. A lot of those teams played a similar style and won NCAA Tournament games and were competitive in the postseason. A, I'm a shooter, I love shooting 3s. I always feel your team should play a way you enjoy coaching.

I've been blessed with a family who loves basketball and likes being able to score the ball at a high level. Shout-out to my dad in the back of the room as well.

But I think, too, we know Fairfield's a sleeping giant and has been always successful. Coach Frager did a great job. They won the MAAC championship right before I took over. And as our administration put so much into

basketball with a new arena, an updated practice facility and all these things, we knew that was just the beginning of where we could go.

So we really built it intentionally, how can we build a team that we're not going to get the Ayoka Lees of the world but how can we be competitive against teams like that, even though we're not going to get the 6'6" skilled kid. We feel the way we do that is all five on the floor can shoot. Be a tough mismatch for players like that. She'll also be a tough mismatch for us. But building it in a way that we can still win games at the highest level. We've shown that we won on the road at an SEC school, ACC school, beaten Big East teams.

We know we're doing something right and just continuing to get the right fit for that five out.

**Q. The team had a lot of adversity down the stretch, the loss in the regular season at Quinnipiac in the first games of the tournament, responded that night in the tournament. What does it say about the team?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: Law of averages, equal at eventually. While I never think -- we tell the team all the time, especially when we've had to show up night after night knowing we're going to get everybody's best shot, on a 18-, 19-game winning streak, you don't get nights off. But I think for us, we don't need a bad loss to get attention. I don't need -- we shouldn't need a slip-up to get our attention to try go do ultimately what we want to do.

We learned a lot from the Quinnipiac loss. They're also a very good team. I made a hard push for them that they should be in the ACC Tournament, as so many different conferences made pushes for really good, quote/unquote, mid-major teams. But I think for us that showed us, A, a lot of ways we probably missed the boat in exploiting some things offensively.

I think we refocused on a lot of things. Then going into the MAAC tournament, while we didn't shoot it our best the first two games, we were able to hunker down and rely on our defense.

**Q. Wanted to ask about K-State, not just Ayoka, but they really pride themselves on the length they have on both sides of the ball. What have you seen from that, what challenges does that present for a team that plays naturally a little bit smaller?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: The obvious challenge is how they've thrown in the post. Not only you mentioned not only Lee but they have several really good post players that have a size advantage.

They present difficult challenges because they not only can play in the post but they also have really good shooters around.

So in the same way we tried to put people in tough positions of where to help from, they do the same thing. Are you going to help on an All-American post player and leave 40 percent 3-point shooters opened.

You mentioned their length across the board. Their guards are big too. Their guards are as big as some of our road runners. We've seen that now. We played teams in the non-conference. Indiana was the similar last year where their length presented a challenge. But we also know there's a reason that we say "shooters you" and "meep meep" and "road runners" and all of that is because we feel we can play a pace that you have to keep up with us as well.

**Q. I was talking to Blake on Monday, talked about the MAAC tournament, talked about the first two games in the MAAC tournament, wasn't Fairfield really basketball. Then you turn the page to Saturday and then Fairfield basketball kind of came back to life. How do you continue to transition that Fairfield basketball game against Quinnipiac last weekend and put it into the national stage?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: Our number one kind of value that we talk about in our program is being selfless. And I don't think we were being inherently selfish in the way we played early on. I just think that the ball didn't move as well for easy shots that we could have gotten that we missed opportunities for early in the MAAC tournament.

I think we actually showed some of those clips going into the MAAC championship, some of the 3s we got early on were great and they just didn't just go in. But there were others where we could have passed up good shots for great shots. I think we really saw that show up in Quinnipiac -- it helps when they go in as well.

But I think we also know that our advantage is the fact that all five can shoot 3s, that we can play at a breakneck speed, and so we worked a ton on just kind of honing in on that and when to pick our spots. Obviously they have length in the paint. When to pick our spots of getting feet in paint and when to spread it out to really good shooters.

**Q. First, does Kansas State compare to anyone who you played this year, or do you have to go back to Indiana and Holmes and 3-point shooters to get an idea how you want to approach, defend Kansas State?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: You know, you can't say it's an exact comparison, but we've obviously played Oklahoma State in the non-conference who have a 6'6" post player that presented a challenge for us then and very good shooters. We're able to use and look at that film of things that worked, things that didn't work. We've had some different challenges. Wake Forest had some really good post players and Arkansas had shooters all around.

We've played teams, and even in our league, we are still outsized even in the MAAC most nights. There's 6'5" post players in our league as well. Again, nothing is a direct comparison, but we've been able to kind of see what works for this team, how we can be disruptive, things we need to do maybe a little differently that we didn't like and take that and blend it into whatever this game plan is going to look like for us.

**Q. You put a lot of pride into the academic side of how your team does. I know you had several players named to the All-MAAC team, but I want to talk about Emina specifically and how does she -- when you watch her and you watch her perform on the court and then you realize she's a 4.0 student, what does that show you? What does that mean to you and your program, the things that you feel are important?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: It's one of the reasons that I was really intrigued by Fairfield in the first place of the academic profile. I always feel that if women, student-athletes are motivated in one area of their life in the academic space, then they're going to be motivated in all areas. Emina is a shining example of that. We've got a team that really does care about the degree that they get at Fairfield, which is a great one.

But she's someone that it's pretty incredible to watch her transfer midway through her career two years in, still was able to graduate in three years with her degree in finance and now is getting a one-year master's. She was able to graduate in three with a 4.0 and now getting a one-year master's in our Dillon School of Business.

She's the epitome of a student-athlete, where she really cares and focuses on every detail of her life and obviously spans into academics, but you can see it also in how she plays.

She's one of the most diligent film watchers I've seen. She takes notes in every film session, and she's one of the best I've coached in taking feedback from a film session or workout and immediately applying it. You can see why she's really good. And whatever she touches she does a great job in.

**Q. Going back to the Kansas State, they're obviously one of the most prolific and relentless offenses in the country, particularly in the first quarter where they get off to hot starts and rarely let up. How is your team trying to keep up, go toe to toe, placing emphasis to not lose momentum, and B, limit the contagious offense, which has two AP All-Americans and a bunch of other shooters who can light it up?**

CARLY THIBAUT-DUDONIS: They're a handful. And you can probably argue why they, with Lee, are not a 5 seed. But regardless I think that we've got a specific game plan and some wrinkles to try and be disruptive.

We know we can't just sit behind and allow them to do whatever they want whenever they want. But we also know that they have a game plan for a lot of what we're going to do as well.

I don't think we're necessarily going to pitch a shoutout and keep them to a couple of points a quarter. But I think for us, too, also we have to strike a balance still playing with our pace and not allowing them to get in a rhythm from playing inside/outside and kind of popping the ball wherever they want to go.

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