

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - West Virginia vs Iowa

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Carver-Hawkeye Arena

West Virginia Mountaineers

Coach Mark Kellogg

Jayla Hemingway

Kylee Blacksten

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll go right to questions for the student-athletes. Please raise your hand with your questions.

Q. Jayla, every game could be your last one in uniform. How do you play with that mindset or put that in the back of your mind? Is that something you play with now? Obviously you don't want it to be your last game, but how does that impact your performance or even just your day to day while you go through this tournament?

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: I think that every game I played this season, I tried to play like it was my last game and leaving it all on the court. I feel like this game shouldn't be any different. I try to go out and just always play with as much passion and as much fun as I can and just enjoy living in the moment and try not to think too much about the future.

Q. This one is also for Jayla. I'm sure you noticed yesterday during the game your little sister kind of stole the show a little bit. On top of that, with this being your final year, what does that mean for you to have your family with you for this experience in the NCAA Tournament?

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: It means everything to me. My family have been my village ever since I picked up a basketball. Just having them here in this big game under the big lights, just having them here to support me means everything to me.

Q. Kylee, Coach talks all year about wanting to get to four scores in double digits or at least three. Lauren



and Kyah didn't really get many looks yesterday, so did you feel the burden to kind of, okay, I need to try to get double digits or do my share because there wasn't going to be four in double figures?

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: I don't see it ever as being a burden or anything like that. I think we all play so much for each other that, if there's somebody struggling, somebody else needs to help pick it up. We're always there for each other. So I think it's more a question of being together than anything.

Q. Kylee, there's obviously a lot of talk about Iowa's guards, but I wonder if you could talk about their post play and what you guys may have to do to have some success against them inside?

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: It's just that they're a complete team. So everybody has to be ready to play. It doesn't matter if it's a guard or a post, either way. We just all have to come ready to play and fight.

Q. Kylee, Coach Kellogg talked about how there's kind of been a buildup for you for a good while as to hitting your stride and playing. Do you feel you're kind of finding your flow? You were a big part of that run yesterday that gave you all the lead in the second half. Does it feel like you're hitting your stride in your play at the right time?

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: Yeah, I definitely feel like I'm getting a little bit more comfortable and everything with the system that Coach Kellogg has put in play, but I also think a lot of it comes back to our team. They've always believed in me throughout the whole year. So I think that's something that speaks strides to being comfortable.

Q. Jayla, you knew coming into the year this team had potential and could do some good things. Was there a point midseason where you really thought this team was capable of getting to the stage you're currently on? Any particular game or any stretch of games during the year?

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: Yeah, definitely, I think that I had



my doubts in the beginning, like everyone with a new coach, new teammates. Everyone was kind of skeptical at first. But I think that we all kind of bought into the system and just kind of bought into each other and just kind of played for each other.

I think that going into each game knowing that you have 13 other girls behind you willing to go to war and go to bat for you really speaks volumes.

Q. You guys were both here with Coach Plitzuweit last year, and Jayla, you've been with Coach Carey, Plitzuweit, and now Kellogg. What made you guys want to stay here at West Virginia and not jump ship because times were getting tough and you knew you'd have to adapt to a completely new person and a completely new system?

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: I think for me personally, just being in West Virginia, when I first committed, I didn't even know where West Virginia was. But finally being able to go there in person and just being able to see the environment and see the fans and how everyone there was so welcoming and just embraced me, it really put a lot of -- you know, it was a big factor in my decision.

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: Kind of go off of that too, West Virginia is such a community, like everyone there has your back no matter what. So I think that's something that's huge.

Also, like Kellogg, he had a plan coming in, and he met with all of us and talked about it. So I feel like he really eased a lot of us.

Q. You touched upon West Virginia's fans, and obviously you saw them yesterday, some of them traveled. But you're about to play in a sold-out arena that's going to be a very large portion of Iowa fans. Is there any arena this season that you've played in or anything that's given you any kind of anticipation for what you're about to be walking into?

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: I would say -- I'm trying to think.

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: Big 12.

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: A lot of the Big 12 teams that we play, especially like --

KYLEE BLACKSTEN: Kansas.

JAYLA HEMINGWAY: Kansas especially, playing in a gym that historic. It seems small when it's empty, but when there's fans in there, it definitely is a different atmosphere.

So I think that just being able to stay locked in and just focus on the bigger mission and not get distracted will be a big part of helping us out tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

We'll go right to questions for Coach Mark Kellogg.

Q. Coach, when you came, Jordan came with you, sort of. There was already an established star there in JJ. How did they sort of work out how they were going to do things in the backcourt? They have become a great tandem, so I wonder how that developed.

MARK KELLOGG: Kind of naturally, honestly, and a little organically. I wasn't quite sure -- I know Jordan was super excited to play with JJ and the talented kid that she was, and we later found out that JJ had looked up Jordan and watched some of her film and her stats and was equally excited to play with Jordan.

I wasn't exactly sure how the pairing early on would go. Both can handle the ball. Both can lead the team. JJ being a big time scorer, I thought Jordan could take some of the ball-handling load off of JJ, so we decided to move JJ a little move off the ball at least for most of the game. When it gets late, we can mix and match and play off of both of them.

But their ability to defend, and on the ball they're ball hawks defensively. They both love to do that. And super talented in their own right offensively.

So it's really been a great fit. They're smaller. I didn't know if we could get away with two smaller guards like that at this level. But Jordan really picked up where she left off a year ago at SFA and has been a fantastic addition. JJ was already elite, but I'm glad we've been able to allow her to take off and shine.

Q. Haven't been able to watch a lot of you guys this season, but you guys seem like an aggressive team offensively, both half-court and full court. How would you describe the way you guys like to play defense, and how do you think that will match up against a team like Iowa?

MARK KELLOGG: We've been aggressive by nature, and steals and turnovers has been our MO for most of the year and probably even led the country for the vast majority of the year in both of those categories.

I think we're really good defensively. We just do it differently than a lot of people, and a lot of people, I think, when you press, they think you play fast and just go score

points, and that's not really what we do. Like you saw last night, we can grind out games if we need to. If we need to play a little bit faster, I think we have the capability to do that.

So you get an Iowa, we played Oklahoma earlier in the year that would be somewhat similar to Iowa, how fast they play and the pace at which they play and how elite they are on the offensive end.

So we're aggressive by nature, but we're not the biggest team either. We don't have a ton of size, so we kind of have to make up for it in other areas, and that's kind of been our strength.

Q. Mark, you and your staff are the only staff, first-year staff to get a team to the second round this year. What are the unique challenges with coming into a program first year and kind of melding together a roster that's about half and half, newcomers and returners?

MARK KELLOGG: That's a good one. I didn't know that. Yeah, super excited about where we are. It has come together probably quicker than most people, I guess would have thought. I don't know about in our locker room. I think we thought we had a chance to be pretty good and to be pretty good early.

We set goals that we wanted to be in the postseason. We wanted to advance in the postseason. I said that in the press conference on whatever that was, April 5th or 6th, a year ago, and here we are advancing and in the tournament and played in a fantastic league that prepares you for opportunities like we got last night, and we'll have tomorrow.

Really proud of the group and the buy-in, and it's the collective group in that locker room that really is just tight-knit. We had six returners, seven new ones. So it was really a battle of how could we blend this and how quickly could we blend it. Really by the end of the summer that thing was blended, and that team was clicking from a locker room perspective.

Q. Now that you've had the night to kind of recuperate and start to prepare for Iowa, what are some things you've seen from them outside of the obvious that maybe the whole national media sees that they do well or maybe some things that you could take advantage of as well?

MARK KELLOGG: Well, what the national media and everybody sees is what they do really, really well. The most elite offense in the country, the best offense I've seen

since I've been coaching. And they're special because they have obviously our game's greatest scorer, man or woman, leading the charge. Then they have put the right pieces around her.

And I think Stuelke is playing really, really well. I think Kate Martin is phenomenal, and I'm saying glue as in the greatest compliment I could give her because I think she does everything for that team. And the other kids, Gabbie knows her role.

Those kids, they know what they're doing. They're veteran. They have been here. Coach has done a phenomenal job for many, many years here. So it's a well-oiled machine.

For us, I guess we have to try to get them to leak some oil some way and find a few things we can take advantage of. We probably need them to have a little bit of a bad shooting night and not shoot it so well and slow them down at times.

Yeah, this is elite, as elite of an offensive group as I've ever seen.

Q. Everybody knows about Caitlin Clark, the scorer, but she was two rebounds away yesterday from having a triple double. So how do you go about preparing for somebody who just all around makes an impact on the game?

MARK KELLOGG: I think it's probably her assists more than the rebounds that scare you. If they were offensive rebounds, that would be one thing. Defensive rebounds for her can certainly lead them in transition.

I think, when you're talking about an elite scorer that's averaging 30-plus, but 9-plus assists as well, that's so many more additional points she's creating for her team.

That's kind of the pick your poison, I guess, if you can find a way to do it. Do you try to make her a scorer? Do you try to make her a facilitator? What's the game plan going to be?

We'll continue today and tonight and into tomorrow to try to figure out the best way to somewhat slow her down. That's about all you're -- she's going to get points. She's going to get shots. We know that. We need to make it as hard as possible on her and their team.

Q. I'm sure you talked about it a lot this year, but it's somewhat rare that a team has a first year coach two years in a row the way West Virginia did. How did you sort of, I guess, get everybody in line with, hey, I know



there's been a lot of change around here, but I'm here to stay, and this is what I'm doing? Just sort of I guess win the trust of the players in that way.

MARK KELLOGG: No, that's not an ideal situation at all to come in and be the third coach in three years. I've actually done that one other time in my career when I took over. So I had a little bit of experience.

Honestly, West Virginia was a really, really good fit for me, first off, for Coach Kellogg, the way we play, the hard work, the blue collar, coal mining community. So passionate about their Mountaineers just across the whole entire state.

So it really fit us, it fit my family. Then from the players' side -- so Mike Carey was the coach, longtime coach, so much toughness, defense, pressure. Then Dawn Plitzuweit took over, and that's motion offense and half-court man, and I so came in and combined a little bit of both of those identities. So it kind of meshed a little bit.

We could get out -- those kids that were recruited by Mike Carey wanted to get out and defend. JJ Quinerly has set out to be the all-time steals leader at West Virginia. That's the one goal she gave me when I got here. That was it. That was the random number that she wanted. And Jayla Hemingway and those kids that have been here wanted to play that way.

And Dawn added some motion offensive kids which we tried to start that way too and run some motion, and maybe we've gotten away from that as the year's gone on.

But it just kind of blended from the on-the-court play. I've always played the same way with the press and mixing defenses. So that wasn't new for me. Didn't know if our team would pick this up quite as quickly as it did, but it just fit. It really fit early, and they've just kind of taken off with it.

Q. Speaking further on that, when you were still at SFA, when Wren Baker offered you the job, did you see players like Jayla, Kyah, and JJ potentially returning and think, wow, they can really fit in my system? This is a match made in heaven. Is that what you were going through when you were still in Texas?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, I had watched film on them through that process. And while you're interviewing, you're trying to study and see what you're walking into. I know those kids fit really well with what we did. I thought they would come back, but you never know until you get there and we get to know each other and they see the vision and can at least have an idea what that vision looks like once I painted a picture for them.

No, they were pretty much all bought in. That group really wanted to stay together, wanted to do something like they're doing, do something special.

I'm so proud they're getting rewarded because they did choose to stay. This day and age, a lot of them don't make that choice. So really proud that group chose to stay and be Mountaineers.

Q. Wanted to follow up on my first question. Iowa is a team that's first in the country in assists per game and third in the country in assist-to-turnover ratio. How do you balance you guys' aggressiveness on defense and not be overly aggressive? Because you're facing a team that can really spread the ball around a lot of really good passers.

MARK KELLOGG: No, that will be the challenge. Without giving too much away, I guess, you've got to try to slow them down. Slowing them down means slowing the ball down, and that's, I think, what you're alluding to is how quickly they move the ball. Your defense moves as the ball moves, of course. So if we can slow the ball down a little bit, that gives us an advantage.

I think we've got some speed and quickness that can certainly help do that. Yeah, you've got to slow the ball down. You've got to slow the ball movement down. Otherwise, yeah, they can just start to pick you apart. When they get going and they get clicking, it's pretty fun to watch. Not to prepare for, but fun to watch.

Q. You talk about a team that has had three of its five starters, three coaches in five years, in Jayla's case four in five. You said at points this season this team gets along so well, you're enjoying this season. What makes them blend so well? Is it a sense of humor? Is it shared purpose, knowing it's sort of about the whole instead of just the individual?

MARK KELLOGG: Good question. I think it's a little bit of all of that, to be honest. It is a close-knit group. Egos have been pretty much set aside. I'm not really concerned with who's scoring the points or getting the assists. It's a very unselfish group. Yeah, they just genuinely enjoy each other.

We don't really have any big, strong, huge personalities either. I think that's where you get that even-keel nature. It's probably relaxed me a little bit, which is why I've said I've had so much fun this year, because we've just been able to kind of flat line. And I mean that every day we go to work.

I kind of joked, early in the year I was fighting them. Our

practices were boring. We had no energy. I'm trying to get them going, and they're not meeting me there. It was more like, Coach, relax. We've got you. It wasn't who they were.

Same thing in games. We'd get in the timeout, and they were on a run, and I'm trying to get them going, telling them it's not good enough, and they were always just giving me that look.

It's just relaxed me and allowed me to sit back too, enjoy it, and trust them a little bit. It's this mutual trust. Again, that's something that's hard to gain quickly today with kids and coaches. Sometimes it takes a little while. But I think we got past that pretty quick.

Q. Kylee really sort of intrigues me. What is her position? She told me that she's really played different positions under all the different coaches she's had. How do you sort of visualize her? What do you use her for?

MARK KELLOGG: I guess, if you wanted to define a position, she doesn't really play the one we should define her as, but just that was the option we had. That was the best option we had when we started the year. We started the same lineup every game the entire season, which is just unheard of, I think, too, for the most part.

Kylee is a forward that we just -- that we play as a five. If you want to put a position on it, but that's not really what she is. She guards the other team's five. But offensively that's not the way she plays. She's more of a forward that faces up, can shoot it, put it on the floor a little bit.

She's gotten a lot more confident the last three to four weeks. I was happy for her last night to get to double figures, hit a three, put it on the floor. She can run. She's a runner. She was getting shin splints in the fall. She trails in Morgantown, and she'd take her dog and go running after practice several miles. We'd have to tell her just you can't do that. Your body's going to break down.

But that's the kind of work ethic she has. I see her in the gym quite a bit, comes back in here and gets shots up.

Position, I don't -- offensively, I don't care what position you play. We work to a skill set. Defensively, you've got to guard somebody. I guess she guards the five, but offensively we just allow her to play as her skill set allows.

Q. I asked Jayla this earlier. You're about to play in a sold-out arena, and I think it's like 15,500. How do you prepare a team to walk into that kind of environment? Is there an arena in the Big 12 that you've played this year that's kind of helped you prepare for that, or how

do you go about that?

MARK KELLOGG: Well, yes and no. We have not played in front of 15,000. That will be new. It will be loud. We understand that. We have played in some loud venues. I don't know, maybe when you get to a certain point, when you're at 6,000, 7,000, it's loud and you can't hear anyway. So if it's 15 and it's loud, you're still not going to be able to hear.

You work through some of your nonverbal cues with your team, things that you don't have to vocalize that you can do with hand signs and things like that. We'll talk through that a little bit to make sure we're prepared.

Then hopefully somehow we can attempt to take the crowd out of it in some capacity, you know, defend. Hopefully they're not making shots and doing as best of a job that we can to just try to somewhat limit the noise.

But that's going to be hard to do, and it will be rockin', there's no doubt. Man, what a great experience. If you're a competitor, this is what you live for. Our team, I think they'll be super excited for this. I mean, just what a great atmosphere. This is as good as it gets right now in women's basketball and any basketball.

Obviously, as we've said, it's the last game for this senior group that's just had a phenomenal career. I don't know what it was exactly like when they got here, but I don't think it was like what it is right now if that's fair to say. Man, that's pretty special in women's basketball to see what they've done.

I was telling our staff yesterday when I was at that Holy Cross game sitting down there, I was like I would love to have one of these in Morgantown at some point. This would be pretty special for us and our program to get something like this going, and I think we can. But certainly they've done a phenomenal job here.

Q. Obviously in your first year with West Virginia, first time in a Power 5 conference, could you have imagined a year ago that you would be in this situation getting ready to -- obviously it will be all eyes on wherever Iowa goes in the tournament. So could you have imagined a year ago that you'd be here in this situation in the NCAA Tournament?

MARK KELLOGG: Yes and no. No, I never allowed myself, I guess, to like go this far or think that this moment we'd be right here in Iowa City and everything that's gone with it and Caitlin announcing that she's going pro. So this will be it for her. No, that piece, absolutely not.

Did I have a vision that my program could get to the postseason? Sure. Did I think we could win a game? Yeah, probably. Maybe not this quickly, but I sure hoped that it could happen.

Again, I think it's special. I think we need to take it in but understand at the same time our season is on the line, and there's a lot that comes with that, but understand where we are and who we're playing against and the environment that they've created here. Man, that's special, and that's a really, really cool thing for our kids. It will be an experience and a memory they have the rest of their lives.

Q. If I could just ask you some of the big picture questions in terms of your first season in the Big 12. Travel is not -- it's hard for West Virginia. It has been since they joined, being an East Coast school. I guess now UCF is a fellow East Coast school. Next year you're going to have the Four Corners schools come in. I just wonder what your thoughts are on being part of the conference, and how do you think the conference going forward is going to continue to be one of the top conferences in the women's game?

MARK KELLOGG: I loved every second of it. You're talking to a guy who came from the WAC in Nacogdoches, Texas, and we were on a commercial flight. So we had to drive 2 1/2 hours to Houston or Dallas and get on a commercial flight and fly to Seattle and then play, and then play an afternoon on Thursday night, play an afternoon in Riverside, California, or vice versa, and take the redeye home, after you get home and get back Sunday at 9:00 a.m.

So Big 12 travel from Morgantown wasn't so bad. Relative to other schools in our league, yes. I know that's the question you're asking. Yes, we are a geographical outlier with a few other schools. Man, it was fun. I think it prepares you.

I had played several of those schools and those venues, so from a coaching standpoint, I thought we would be okay and watched plenty of the Big 12 because that was kind of my footprint in Texas.

Yeah, I thought it prepared us. I think it will be equally as good when the Four Corners, as you said, schools come in. Those are women's basketball powers right now. Big 12 went 7-0 in the first round, I saw. Big time props to the Big 12 and what they did those first two days in the NCAA Tournament.

Yeah, it's a gauntlet. And I think what helps you is there's so many different styles in the Big 12. We've had so many different types of game plans when you get on some of

these shorter notices. Maybe we can at least go back and recall something that we've already talked about or a team we've already played against because the styles are so different. You get size in post play some places. You get speed and quickness with others. You get athleticism with some schools.

Really I think we've faced a lot of different types of teams that prepare you for these opportunities.

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