

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Holy Cross vs Michigan

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Crisler Center

Michigan Wolverines Coach Kim Barnes Arico

Syla Swords

Olivia Olson

Media Conference



were able -- we didn't know our opponent for a while, so we were able to focus on our team identity and what we wanted leading into the tournament.

Q. Syla, you said the No. 2 seed that you deserved. That's a new record for the program. When that popped up that you were a 2 seed? What was the reaction? What was your general feeling to get that reward and be that seed?

SYLA SWORDS: Yeah, we were surprised but just you could feel in the room the genuine love for each other and the love for the program, whether it be within us as players, within our staff. That was more what we were feeling rather than the, oh, we got the 2, we got what we deserve, per se. It was more just, no, we love where we are, we love who we're here with, and just a great appreciation for wearing the Michigan jersey to be able to see our name come up when it did.

Q. You guys had some tournament experience last year. How are you guys approaching this first round specifically different than how did you last season?

OLIVIA OLSON: Yeah, we have experience under our belt this year. I mean, we've played minutes like upper classmen have, so we're really excited to put our experience to show and just like again get as far as we can. Our belief in each other and our circle, we believe we can make it to the National Championship. So we're just pushing hard every day and using our experience as a way to grow.

Q. Can you talk about your preliminary reactions to the Holy Cross matchup and any thoughts you have heading into the game?

SYLA SWORDS: Yeah, any matchup in March is going to be a tough one, but I would say we're more so focused on what we do, what we do well. Even going through film today, we started -- Coach asked around the room what do we need to do to win this game. I think that's what separates us. We've been able to play with the tops in the country, and that's because we're very focused on us, and we know if we do what we can do, then we're going to have

Q. For both of you, I know you came with the goal of being here, so now that you are here to get ready to host, just kind of talk about what you guys have been talking about for the last few days.

OLIVIA OLSON: Yeah, our goal coming in this year, even last year was to host. I think we talked about that a lot at the beginning of the season and we accomplished that. But we want to keep going and we want to get further than just hosting. Just keep our momentum going. We're excited.

SYLA SWORDS: I think it's also recognize that we put the work in to get to this moment and we deserve to have that 2 seed next to our name, we deserve to have these games being played here in Ann Arbor. So coming into this first round with a lot of confidence trusting that we put the work in to get to where we are.

Q. It's been a while since you played. How have you stayed sharp? What did you do with the extra time kind of like a bye week, I guess?

SYLA SWORDS: Normally we split up the teams with starters and then bench players, but Coach has done a great job of just mixing up who we're playing with every day, who we're playing against every day. We've done a lot against each other rather than our practice squad, and those are always very competitive because we all want to push each other to be better. So practices have been really intense and really high competitively.

OLIVIA OLSON: Yeah, I think it's just been a great week or two of just focusing on ourselves. A lot of the season we've had to focus on scout and the next game, but we



a lot of success.

Q. Coach, 83.6 points per game is the most points in program history. You're beating teams by the biggest margin in program history. You had the best conference record. You're a 2 seed, best seed in school history. Tell me how are you going to bring that momentum in in the most unpredictable environment in sports?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. I know just listening to our players speak before about Holy Cross, you can probably say all the opposite for them on the defensive end. They're a tremendous program having a great season and really limits teams in scoring.

So it's going to be an interesting matchup tomorrow, for sure. They're a tremendous defensive team. They hold teams in the 50s, and we try to play in the 80s. So it's going to be interesting whose pace will win out.

I think it's something we've emphasized from the beginning of the year because of the players we have in the program. We always try to play to the strengths of our team and we can really get out and push pace in transition. I mean, that's led by Mila Holloway, one of the best point guards I feel like in the country. Her growth just from her freshman year to or sophomore year has been incredible.

She understands the pace at which we want to play, so she advances the ball, she gets paint touches, she can get the ball up the floor extremely quick. But when you have the versatility of an Olivia Olson, who could play any position on the floor 1 to 5, that could bring up the ball as well, I think that really is a tough matchup to handle.

And you add Sylva Swords on that wing with the ability to shoot shots like she can shoot 3s and also get to the basket, I think it's just very helpful.

And Ashley Sofilkanich has provided -- she came from the Patriot League. She's provided a great inside presence for us.

But our defense, as much as we're talking about the pace of our offense, our offense is predicated by our defensive intensity and by our defensive pressure. That pressure allows us to force people to make mistakes, and those mistakes get us some easy buckets which leads to points in the 80s.

Q. What does it mean to have the NCAA tournament here, and unlike the last time, do you feel like this could become the standard especially with how young your team is, that this could be an expectation like this

is what Michigan women's basketball does?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, the goal is to always win championships and to be the best team that you can be.

I remember the first time we had an opportunity to host and just how incredible that was because when I first got here, our goal was to make the NCAA tournament.

Now, it's funny, my brother called me, he was like, Do you remember your goal was to make the NCAA tournament? Now you're the team that people are coming after.

It has shifted. And Naz Hillmon certainly, and Naz Hillmon's group of players certainly helped that shift, and they were the first team to host.

This group is built a little bit different. This group has been able to do things as freshmen that really haven't been done before. It's not a singular, we always say Naz, and Naz was an All-American and Naz had a great supporting cast, but this team now has multiple people that on any given night can be the leading scorer or on any given night can be the most impactful player.

So a lot of times what people talk about is what shows up in the box score. What we talk about as a team is who really impacted the game. That impact might be a Brooke Daniels, who might not show up in the box score but really ignited our defensive pressure.

So we try to celebrate who every team is. And this team is built a little bit different. The experiences that they've had in their young career are just different than that first team that hosted. That was kind of on the tail end of their career.

So I think that's the goal. The goal is to always be in this position. You have to be able to get those type of players that come in with that drive, that vision, that talent to be able to do it, then the chemistry to be able to create something special.

They feel that as a group. They're a young group that leans into each other, and they're very unselfish and they're very hard working. They want to do something special for Michigan. They want to do things that haven't been done in Michigan women's basketball and that's why they all committed to us a few years ago. But that's kind of the vision that we have now.

Q. What was it about Kendall and Ashley that stood out in the transfer portal and what have they brought to your team this season?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, that's a great question. So our team last year, we started three freshmen. Most of you guys know that, Mila Holloway, Olivia Olson and Syla Swords. They were three of the most dynamic players in the country.

Syla just came in with that tremendous experience. An Olympian, what kind of high school kid is an Olympian? Few and far between, and I think she brought that international experience to our team.

Olivia Olson was one of the best players in the country coming in as well, and then Mila was a little bit under the radar but really was a great prospect for us at that point guard position. Really was a great fit for us.

You have Te'Yala Delfosse, who her freshman year had we thought a really strong freshman year for us, has really taken those steps her sophomore year. I think when it's all said and done, Te'Yala's going to have a chance to be a WNBA draft pick just like the rest of them, that's the type of talent that she is.

So when you think about that core group returning with the older kids sprinkled in of Macy Brown and Alyssa Crockett and Ally VanTimmeren, like what did we need, what was really important for us to put this total package together to be the best Michigan team that we could be.

Last year we played five guards because we needed a true post presence. We felt like Ashley could certainly be that for us. A back-to-the-basket player, someone with great touch, someone that was the Player of the Year in her league, could really score the basketball and could rebound the basketball, two key things for us that were going to be important. So that was something that was really important for us in the portal.

And then last was Kendall. Kendall is someone that I've watched since she's been a little kid. I watched her mother as a player. I think I coached against her mother when her mother was a player at LIU in Brooklyn. I've known her family for a long time. Her mother's a legendary high school coach, an AAU coach who just does a tremendous job. So I had watched Kendall grow up really. She played against my children from a really young age, so I've known Kendall probably since she's been 8 or 10 years old.

Just as a coach's kid, her understanding for the game, her feel for the game, her ability to be selfless and do whatever your team needed to help you be successful was something that our team needed from a 4 spot. So I knew that she could play alongside the players that we had returning as well as Ashley. She was another McDonald's all American. She could play inside and out. She just has

an incredible IQ and feel for the game.

Those were two key pieces. I think the transfer portal's an interesting thing in college athletics right now, and at the University of Michigan you have to be incredibly, incredibly selective. It's not a place for anyone. You have to care about your academic piece as much as you care about your basketball piece. You have to be a person who prides themselves on excellence in every facet of your life.

Those two young women were the type of players that would fit into our program and that would help our program advance even further.

Q. Kim, a couple colorful descriptions of Brooke just now in the locker room. How would you describe her and how important is what she brings at this time in the season postseason?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah, Brooke is our -- I remember at the beginning of the year when we were playing in Detroit and we were playing Notre Dame for the matchup of who we lost to last year in the NCAA tournament. Brooke kind of gave our pre-game -- if you've been at our game day stuff, we always have someone who kind of leads the pre-game.

Brooke talked about for her what it meant to be in Detroit. We played at Wayne State on a neutral court. Just the mentality that she has being a Michigan kid, being a Detroit kid, just the blue collar attitude, just the toughness that comes with that, just the grit that comes with that, and the underdog mentality.

Brooke is always the smallest person on the floor by far, and most nights she's the leading rebounder on the court. She ignites our defense, she has an energy, and we say a dog, a fight to her that every team needs.

She just ignites our team. She's fun to coach. I think every team needs someone that has that little bit of "ugh" and she has that little bit of "ugh." She makes us go.

That's why I kind of started the conversation with what she does doesn't necessarily show up in the box score, but it gets our team fired up. I always talk about the game at Michigan State last year. So we played Michigan State here for our freshmen, it was their first time playing in that rivalry last year here. We were off to a great season so far, and Michigan State came in and I think we were like feeling -- we didn't know what that was all about and we got smoked.

Ten days later we had to go to Michigan State and play at their place. How were we going to respond, how was our

growth going to be like, and Brooke kind of took over that game and showed our young team at that time what it takes to be elite and what it takes to compete at this level.

I think there's kind of been no turning back from that point. She's a senior on our team, and a lot of our young kids lean into that and were ignited by her energy, for sure.

Q. Olivia Olson was named Third-Team All-American yesterday. She's only the second one ever in program history. Can you just talk a little bit about how much she improved from last year to this year to make that leap from being a really good freshman to an All-American player?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yeah. Thanks for bringing that up because you don't want that not to be mentioned.

What an incredible, incredible honor. We always talk about Naz being our first All-American. It's hard to be an All-American. College basketball, women's college basketball right now is at its peak. We have better players than we ever had before, we are deeper than we've ever been before. The talent pool is absolutely incredible. Olivia Olson is one of the best, and she is on our team and I get to coach her every single day, and she's a sophomore. Like a lot of great things there.

I can't say enough about this young woman. I am fortunate every single day to come to work with somebody like her. She is our hardest worker. It's like from one day to the next, who's going to work -- who's diving on the floor more, is it her or Sylva? Who's working harder, is it her or Sylva? Whose numbers are off the charts, is it her or Sylva? They compete in the best way possible as tremendous teammates.

But what Olivia has been able to do this year has been absolutely incredible. The consistency, I mean, that's like what's off the charts. People circle her at the top of the scout every single day and she's still able to come out and officially score 20 points a game. Like how does that happen? She's one of the best rebounders. Her development has been incredible. I think she has all the tools, but it's her work ethic and it's her mindset that separates her from the rest of the world.

She's relentless. She's driven at a really high level. We as coaches need to monitor all the time to make sure she's out of the gym and make sure that she's not overdoing it because she just wants to be so great. Was that good enough? Did I do OK today, Coach? Like always trying to figure out a way to get better.

I think she really invested in the offseason in being

incredibly intentional to the things that she needed to work on to take the next steps in her development. That has been really important to her. I think one of the most important things for me as a coach sitting in this spot, especially in the world of the transfer portal, NIL, all that, at the end of the day it's about people and it's about developing people.

When these young kids committed, one of the most important things for them was that they continue their development. They came in as great players, they wanted to leave as pros. That's something that our staff has made the commitment to we're going to help you get better, we're going to pour into you, we're going to do whatever it is to help you achieve your goals.

I know Olivia has an amazing relationship with a ton of our assistants. I know they each work with her individually on different things. You can really see her growth. But at the end of the day, that credit is to Olivia and just how driven and how focused she is at being great and helping Michigan be great.

Q. Sylva talked a little bit about the different drills and mixing up the matchup for practice this week. How else has the preparation been different from the regular season, or have you tried to keep it pretty consistent?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Years ago when this was my first NCAA tournament, so just a couple years ago, I was like, oh, my gosh, there's two weeks in between, like what are we going to do? It's all about your mindset. You have to switch that and you have to embrace what it is.

So I as a coach actually love these couple of weeks. It kind of brings us back to the beginning of the season. It gives us a chance to give our kids a few days off, which they never get. We practice a couple days, have a day off, practice a couple days, have a day off. So we can really make practices competitive and intense.

It brings us back to working on us. I think Sylva spoke about that. The latter part of the year, all you really focus on is your opponent and how you're going to prepare for your opponent. This part of the year gives us a chance to work on Michigan and how do we need to get better and what are the things that we struggled with during the course of the year that we can spend time on in these past two weeks really working on.

So I love it. I also love the fact that we can mix up our teams. The latter part of the year it's maize and blue, our starting group, our second group. This gives us an opportunity to really mix up those teams and compete

against each other.

So for me it's fun. I hope it's fun for them, too. I think it just gives us an opportunity to stay fresh. Like you want to go into the NCAA tournament fresh and recovered, and the season, especially our season, if you followed our season, February was a bear. We played like six top-15 opponents in a row, and we were able to come out of that pretty good and healthy.

So I think this part of the year is making sure that we're rested, we're healthy, we're energized and we're improved, and these last 10 days have given us an opportunity to do that.

