

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vermont vs NC State

Friday, March 21, 2025

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Reynolds Coliseum

Vermont Catamounts

Bella Vito

Anna Olson

Catherine Gilwee

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We will start our press conference with the student-athletes from Vermont. Questions, please.

Q. We'll start with Cat. You've had a couple of days down here in North Carolina to kind of get adjusted, starting to see what it looks like in the facility. Has it really hit you that you guys are having this opportunity again to play in the NCAA Tournament, and how do you try and manage the emotions?

CATHERINE GILWEE: Yeah, I think it's been starting to hit more today. You know, we get here, see the facilities, and just seeing all the other teams, just the whole experience. I think it's all coming together. We're just super grateful to be here, and we're really looking forward to it.

Q. Anna, obviously during the conference tournament, other teams, at least in the first couple of rounds, made a point of trying to take away you offensively. Obviously that opened up opportunities for a lot of your teammates. Do you feel like that's going to be something that NC State is looking to do as well? How do you try and counter that?

ANNA OLSON: I guess I can't really predict what they're going to do. Obviously they have a lot of height in the post, so I'm not expecting defense like we had in the conference tournament, but I think we do a really good job at adjusting on the fly and seeing what the defense is giving us.

I think obviously in the first quarter, it will be a good time to tell what they're taking away from what they're giving us,



and we'll read off of that.

THE MODERATOR: You obviously are going to play in the home gym of NC State, but you just came off of a situation where you played in the home gym to win your conference championship. How do you try to make things turn in your favor playing basically in an opponent's gym?

BELLA VITO: I think playing in Albany and winning there gave us momentum because earlier in the season we hadn't done a great job playing in away stadiums. We play a lot better at Patrick. I think we're going to build off that momentum of winning in an opponent's gym and try to do the same here.

ANNA OLSON: I think when we went into Albany, we had the mindset we're going to treat it like we're in Patrick gym because we obviously play much better at home. I think that mindset carried us far. We attacked and played with confidence and took shots that we would take in Patrick. We're going to do the same thing here and pretend like we're back home.

CATHERINE GILWEE: To echo what they just said, on top of that, just kind of finding the energy from within our team and not relying on -- one reason why we play so well at Patrick is because we have amazing fans. We did a really good job at Albany of creating our own energy and feeding off of one another rather than relying on the fans.

We also had amazing fans that traveled to Albany, but I think that's going to be super important for tomorrow's game.

Q. Bella, you guys all mentioned kind of trying to make it feel more like home. What are some things specifically that you guys have tried to do? Is there a specific meal that you have usually ahead of a home game that you are trying to continue down here? Is there something that you can do from a routine perspective to kind of try and make it seem as much like home as possible?

BELLA VITO: Yeah, we have our two-day prep. Everyone has their routines, everything they do, the little things. So

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we were just told pretend like it's a home game, do your routines, do all the little things that you usually do when we're back at home to make it feel more like a home game.

THE MODERATOR: Bella, you mentioned earlier the rough start you guys had. I think it was 5-10, but what has allowed you to turn things around where you have won 16 of your last 18? I'll ask all of you that.

BELLA VITO: I just think we were at a low, and we came together as a team. I think the turning point was really just starting to believe in ourselves. We knew all along that we had a special group. It was just when it started to really click and we came together as one, we were, like, we're going to do this thing. We started to believe in ourselves and play more with confidence and trusting in one another.

ANNA OLSON: Yeah, I think after our first conference game when we lost against Albany, I think Bella came and talked to the team and basically had that mindset, we have to have no regrets. We have a lot of people on this team that this is their last year, so we kind of had to approach the season like no regrets. If we're going to go out there and lose, we're going to go out hard and lose. It's not like we're not going to not give it our all. Then we all started to really flow and gel together.

CATHERINE GILWEE: Like Anna and Bella said, after the Albany game halfway through the season, we kind of had a gut check, like, what kind of team we wanted to be. We came together as a team, like Anna mentioned. Bella talked to the team, and we kind of all just came to the conclusion that where we want to be, and we weren't at that at that point in the season.

We always knew we had a lot much talent. Like Bella said, we were a special group. It was kind of just figuring out how to put all of our mindsets together and all work towards the same goal and learn how to play our best basketball together. I think obviously we did that, and everyone was bought in. It took us a little while to get there, but we figured it out.

THE MODERATOR: You are third best in the country, only giving up 52 points per game. What is it about that? Is it a mindset, a scheme, is it a physical talent? What is it about it that makes your defense so tough?

CATHERINE GILWEE: I think defense is always something that Coach Kresge talks about, harps about from day one. If you don't play defense, you're not going to play in our program.

I think one thing about our team is we're not always the most athletic and the biggest team, but we always work

really hard on defense, and we know our principles and know we're going to have each other's backs. We don't have to be the most athletic when we're smart, and we know exactly what our roles are and how to play defense together. I think that's how we've been so successful on defense.

ANNA OLSON: Yeah, I think also we start every single practice with a defensive drill. I think that sets a tone. If we're going to win a game, we're going to do it with defense. I think we've won a lot of games because of our defense.

The big thing is we play such good team defense. We rely on each other. If somebody gets beat and in the back of your mind somebody is going to be there to help you. Playing out there, it let's you play more fearless. You can close out harder and do things harder because you know your teammate has your back.

BELLA VITO: Defense wins championships, and I think we all got here, and we are under Kresge, who that's her motto. So I think the rules and principles that she's engraved in the program and we all follow them and know them to a T has allowed us to just work as one unit. If someone slips up, someone has their back.

I think just our rules and principles have made us get this far in our defense.

Q. Would you guys have considered yourselves defensive players before you got to Vermont? How much of that was once you got to the program either, like you said, play defense or don't play, and also just getting that engrained into you over time?

BELLA VITO: I've always loved defense, and that's a big reason I picked Vermont, but I think getting here, it took it to a completely different level. I was just a defender.

Then learning the rules and principles that this program teaches has brought my defensive capabilities to a completely different level.

ANNA OLSON: Yeah, I kind of agree. I think before I came here, I definitely did focus on defense, but it was more individual. It was more what can I do out there? How much can I fight with these big post players in AAU tournaments? Now I'm doing the same thing, but now it's more team defense. I think that aspect of defense has really changed for me.

CATHERINE GILWEE: Yeah, I think I was lucky enough to come from a program in high school that also focused heavily on defense, so I think it wasn't completely new to

me, but like Bella said, I think knowing our team principles, our rules, it just took it to a whole new level.

Q. I'm just curious about this too. Now you can just open your phone and go on Instagram, and they're always going to show you a clip of the newest move to do, add more to your bag, double crossover, tween crossover. You don't see defensive principles, defensive just strategies, approaches to guarding a player. I was wondering if you could, how would you even teach that to somebody, and how do you make that cool because getting stops wins games because if you can't score, you can't win.

CATHERINE GILWEE: That's a really good question. I think it's always going to be way easier to highlight the flashy offensive move than someone locking up on defense and getting a stop. I think it's almost taking it to another level. It's way harder to highlight team defense than individual defense.

I think sometimes you'll see clips of individuals really locking down on defense. Sometimes that will get a shout-out, but team defense, which is what Kresge builds her whole program off of, is not always highlighted because it's way harder to see that when you are watching throughout the flow of the game.

So that's a tough question. I'm not sure how I would highlight that or teach it, but I think just continuing to enforce the same principles and making sure that everyone is locked in on the same page is what I would say.

ANNA OLSON: Yeah, I really do think defense is a silent killer out there. I think you really do have to experience it to really embrace it, and I think honestly a big switch for me was our championship game two years ago against Albany was a really low-scoring game. It was, like, 30s. We won that game because of defense.

I think experiencing that game, we just won a championship because of our defense. It really just sparked it even more for our program to keep building off of that.

BELLA VITO: Yeah, I think it's really easy to show all the flashy moves on offense, but it's harder to get someone to really, really want to buy in on defense. To get to a program that really does that and, like Cat said, you don't play unless you play defense, it makes you appreciate the sport I think and the defensive side of the sport because you win when you get stops. Those stops lead to offense.

Q. This has nothing to do with your particular game, but I was watching the Harvard-Colombia game a

couple of weeks ago, and it was 18-12 in the second quarter. It was turnovers galore. They were having a hard time. Somebody was, like, oh, this is an ugly game. I said, I think you're missing the point. I think both teams really like what's happening on the floor right now. I was wondering if that was a game, like you said, like the one two years ago, where you were, like, no, this might not be pretty or balls going in the basket, but this is exactly the game we want to play, you know.

CATHERINE GILWEE: I can't think of specific games beside that Albany championship game two years ago. Definitely it stands out. I think there's been a ton of games where we haven't shot the ball the best offensively. We didn't have our best game, but we still won because the other team, they weren't able to score just because of our defense.

I think we've had a ton of games like that. I can't think of any specifically if you guys can, but definitely we've done that.

BELL VITO: I think there's a lot of games, and where shots aren't falling it's going to happen. It's part of the sport. When shots aren't falling, you have to rely on your defense. I think that's where some teams get in trouble where they don't have a huge defense, and it puts more pressure on their offense.

We get to go out there and we know our defenses are stable, so it kind of gives us a little less pressure on offense, but I can't think of a specific -- I think it's been an all-season kind of thing.

Q. Kind of a similar game way back ancient history at this point, but the last time UV women's basketball came down and played in this building, 2009, that team was able to win here 52-47. So similar type of game there. Was just wonder if anything any of you had any opportunity, had heard from any of the members of that team, maybe kind of some other groups about what it means to be able to see you back on this stage?

BELLA VITO: I have personally not, but...

ANNA OLSON: I haven't heard anything either, but we have receive a lot of support. I sigh they are comments on social media. They're really rooting for us, so we can feel their love from far away.

CATHERINE GILWEE: I also haven't heard anything specifically from that team, but I think just the support that we receive in our community is amazing. I know so many

people have reached out ask just businesses, organizations have reached out. So we definitely feel the love and the support from Vermont, so...

to be like a shell shock. We've been here, and we're ready for it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

Q. Cat, this is for you. What does it mean for you to get back here playing for your home team as a Vermonter on the biggest stage in college basketball?

CATHERINE GILWEE: Yeah, it means the world to me. Honestly it just means the world to me to play for this team with these teammates and my amazing coaches and just being able to have this opportunity and win the American East and get to play on the big stage, it's been a dream of mine. Now I get to do it twice, which it really means the world to me. I can't even explain it.

I love Vermont, and I love the Vermont community. I just wouldn't change a thing.

THE MODERATOR: This is the second time in three years that you've made the tournament. How has that experience helped you? It's such a goal at the beginning of the year to get to the tournament, and you guys have done that before. Is there anything you can draw from that that will help you when you tip it off against NC State?

CATHERINE GILWEE: I think it definitely helps that we have that experience from two years ago. I think we're obviously still going to have butterflies. We're still going to get nervous because we all know this is the biggest stage in women's college basketball, and I think those nerves are obviously still going to be there, but because we had that experience two years ago, it won't be as much of a shock for some of us.

I think we can just kind of use that as a little confidence boost going into this game. Yeah, just go play Vermont basketball.

ANNA OLSON: Yeah, I agree. I think obviously being here two years ago has really helped with the nerves. We kind of know what we're expecting. Obviously we're still going to have butterflies, but we kind of know what we're walking into. I also do think our nonconference schedule we played a lot of big teams too. I think that experience has also helped in this moment that we can approach this game like any other game. We don't need to be scared, so...

BELLA VITO: Yeah, I think being here two years ago and then last year making it pretty far into the WNIT playing bigger teams, we know what to expect, and we're ready for it.

Yeah, we're going to have the butterflies, but it's not going

