

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Oregon State vs Notre Dame

Friday, March 29, 2024

Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Niele Ivey

Maddy Westbeld

Sonia Citron

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Oregon State 70, Notre Dame 65

NIELE IVEY: Tough experience, tough loss for us, but I would just tell you, I love my team. That's the one thing that I know. This is an incredible group, and we battled a lot this season. We left it on the floor, and just proud of who we are. The last several weeks, winning 10 straight games, redefining ourselves late in February, being ACC champs in a season that had a lot of highs and lows, we really battled. We found our identity, our character, and I'm just blessed to coach this group.

Like I said earlier, it's never easy. It's never easy taking a loss or losing, but I feel like I've won with this team because they're amazing. They inspire me, and I'm grateful to be able to stay here with them and be able to lead them. This is going to propel next season. We are going to use this as motivation. We're going to be better. We're going to be great, and I'm excited to get back to work with them.

I know we need some time, but I'm excited with the group that I have. I'm so grateful for an extraordinary year with this team, season, a lot of love, a lot of growth. We have a lot of firepower coming back. I'm really excited for the future of this program, and I'm really grateful for my team.

Q. Obviously two great defensive teams out there. Can you talk a little bit about what they did to disrupt you, especially Hannah, and when you two decided you had to take this game and it wasn't going to be Hannah to lead you today?



MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I think it was a really strategic game for us on the offensive end. We kind of knew what we were going to get. I think we started to get in our head a little bit in that regard.

I think I started out a little hot, and so I think just trying to roll with that. I think same thing with Sonia.

They did a really good job on Hannah. They did a really good job of playing strategic, and I think we just had to get what we got.

SONIA CITRON: Yeah, I think Maddy said it. I think we were overthinking a little bit in the beginning, but this team just goes with who is putting the ball in the basket at any given time. Throughout the game, sometimes that was Maddy, sometimes that was me, sometimes that was Hannah. That's really how it went.

Q. Maddy, you had those three first-half fouls and ended the game on four and found your rhythm in the second half. Talk about coming back from those fouls and playing kind of careful on defense and still making an impact in the second half.

MADDY WESTBELD: Yeah, I mean, it kind of threw me off defensively a little bit in the second half with playing as aggressive as I wanted to. That was really unfortunate, I think, in the first half I sat for a couple minutes so it wasn't too big of a deal. I think we went into halftime down two or something like that.

It wasn't too big of a deal in the first half. In the second half it definitely disrupted me a little bit defensively, but nevertheless -- there's always ways to play harder.

Q. Hannah obviously still a freshman but putting together it seemed a complete defensive effort, even on a day when her shots were not falling. Could you take me through what it meant, under five to go, you get the 10-second violation that she forces one-on-one defensively and the way her defense powers what you guys do?



SONIA CITRON: I think it speaks, honestly, to Hannah's growth. I think earlier on in the season when she was frustrated offensively, it would just affect her game as a whole, and I think it shows how far Hannah has come as a freshman, where even though things weren't going her way, she told us I'm going to give you everything I have on this possession, on the ball handler and she did just that, and she didn't let it affect her defense. Honestly I think it speaks to her growth as a person and as a player and as a teammate.

MADDY WESTBELD: Absolutely. It speaks to the passion that she has for the game. She can get frustrated but she gives her all for it, and she let us know that. Obviously shots aren't falling, they're not going to fall on some nights, but she's going to give you everything she has on the defensive end. You saw it with the 10-second call.

Yeah, she's going to give it everything.

Q. Sonia, obviously when you lost Kylee in the ACC Tournament you knew teams who were bigger were going to try to go down low against you guys and you didn't have a height advantage down there. What did you do about that today? Obviously they hurt you early down there, but it's nothing you guys haven't had to deal with before. Can you just address the height disparity that you guys have been dealing with?

SONIA CITRON: Yeah. I mean, I think credit to Beers. She's a phenomenal player. We tried a couple different things on her, whether it was fronting her and trying to be in help or it was playing behind her and trying to trap. We tried to throw a couple different things at her. Credit to her; she's a phenomenal player, so she was able to sometimes beat what we threw at her.

Q. Coach, there seemed to be a few disruptions that were a little bit outside of your players' control. Any thoughts on how that impacted the game?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, it was hard starting the game. Felt we got a flow, got a stop, then the clock. I mean, it's part of it. We just have to pivot. But it definitely had more stoppage than I would have expected in a Sweet 16 game.

Q. Can you explain what happened with the nose ring, and is that something that Hannah has had all year? What happened there, and do you think that disrupted play?

NIELE IVEY: Well, I didn't know what happened, so I guess it was a point of emphasis in the Sweet 16 with jewelry and she's had a nose ring the entire season. Just wish we would have known beforehand. Can't control it, so

we had to move on.

But yeah, stoppage of play is never great when you're trying to have flow.

Q. I want to talk about Hannah, specifically you have been highlighting her level of excellence all year and the ways in which she's not a freshman. Two parts to that. One is her defensive intensity never wavered it seemed throughout this game. If you could talk about that level of growth, but also you huddled with her I think it was three times in this game, late third, about two minutes to go, mid fourth and even that 1:10 to go. Take me through what those conversations were like and what you're looking to get out of them, particularly with a freshman who does what she does?

NIELE IVEY: First part, like her defense, she's going to give us her all. That's what she loves playing defense. That's her money is her intensity defensively. She feeds off of being disruptive. Her shot wasn't falling today, and I feel like she was trying to get herself going by being a pest on defense, and she got a couple backcourt violations, which is awesome. She's never going to stop playing, regardless.

So defensively I love her intensity. It's been contagious with our team all season long. I love that part of her game.

Then my conversations is, again, just trying to help her. She was a little frustrated with a couple of her shots that normally go in. Just my conversations is just to empower her, lift her up, positive words of encouragement, knowing that just got to get to the next play, and it's okay. The game is not perfect, and she knows that. Just trying to build confidence in her in any way that I can. I was trying to hug her, get herself -- any moment she's the type of player that can take over, so it was mostly just words of encouragement and positivity.

Q. Timea Gardner had a really big game for Oregon State today and was really efficient down the stretch. Can you talk about what impressed you about her game?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, she's incredible. An incredible player. Knew that going in. Recruited her, as I watched her for a very long time. Like you mentioned she's very efficient. She had 21 points, 11 rebounds, but I felt like she hit us with some dagger, dagger plays. The three going into the fourth quarter with about five seconds left, and her size, her presence, she's very poised, plays with a ton of confidence, is having an incredible season. Credit to her.

She's got great balance around here so she's allowed to

play with freedom, and I thought she had a fantastic game today.

Q. Niele, obviously you guys want to continue to be playing, but I wonder if you could look a little bit forward about how much you bring back from this team and the experiences that they gained together this year.

NIELE IVEY: Absolutely. I think my comment to the team, there's so much good, this program, this team. We have great firepower coming back. You can't teach experience, especially for Hannah. That's what my entire team has received this year. It is a phenomenal year, and I'm really excited. I'm excited next year to bring back Olivia Miles, and we're going to be healthy.

We have an incredible post coming in, and we're just -- it's going to be exciting, like I mentioned.

These type of moments, therefore, is part of our journey, is part of our growth as a program, as a team, and being able to win the ACC, being ACC champions, we're going to learn from all the wonderful experiences that we've received this season. We've had so much growth this year, and I'm really, really excited for the team that's returning. It's going to be incredible to see.

Q. To build off of Nicole's question, Coach, there are a lot of things that I think you can look to, as Kara Lawson said, as just the truth of this game, one way or another. When it comes to having those conversations now that this unit is done with its mission, will that go kind of player by player, and some players may not be returning, they'll be fulfilling other roles? What is your approach to really dig deep, if that's necessary in a game like this?

NIELE IVEY: Right. Definitely individual conversations. I always have end-of-the-year player development plans, the plan for postseason, a team meeting that kind of regroups and talks about what the plan is, what the vision is for the off-season, what's the vision for the off-season.

Every year is different. We have a couple seniors that are graduating. Once we have a little time to process everything, I'll get together with them individually, together with the team, and we're going to get back to work. That's one thing you know about me. I grind, and this team, we're about business.

We're excited, and as far as getting better, we want to get better. I'm going to help this team get better, pour into them. And like I said, every year is different, but I'm looking forward to having those individual conversations

and then getting back to work as a team.

They definitely need some time off, and we'll regroup, refocus on our vision, and get to work.

Q. The one question I want to ask you, that I think one part of the story that's not being told is you talked about the last loss that you had before today. It was not looking as it ended. I don't think you were in the top 16. It didn't even look like you were going to host a bracket. No disrespect to Oregon State, but part of being in that conference, you make that conference strong, so you can't hide and disappear and just come back. What did you say that made that switch because once you turned that switch on or whatever you said, it never turned back? You went on a 10-game winning streak, went into the ACC Tournament with the top teams and you won the tournament. To get this far to the Sweet 16 without Olivia Miles touching the court, what did you say to your team to spark that?

NIELE IVEY: Well, credit to our seniors, credit to Maddy. Maddy kind of led a team meeting after that with help from Sonia Citron, and it was a meeting that basically kind of put a mirror to our face.

I let them have their meeting first, and then I had my meeting. That was just to refocus on our goals. We had a lot of inconsistency at the time, and we were trying to find cohesion. We had some great games and then we had games that weren't so great.

We just regrouped, and everyone, I think, just made the ultimate sacrifice individually to do more, to be better, to work harder, to find a way to come together, and then collectively as a group we just decided like these are things that we need to do, action items for us individually for us to get better as a team.

And then we had a 48-hour window and we had Duke on the road, Big Monday on ESPN, and that was a test for us. I talked about it for the group. Practice was intense. We had to work on getting better because at the time you just have to get better. You can't focus and sit on the last game. ACC is so tough, you've got to move on to the next game.

Prepared them within practice, and then watched -- I just wanted to see what our character was. When you put a mirror to your face, you're either going to step up or you're going to go left, and my team responded. They talked about reinventing themselves after that moment, and just our confidence grew. Our momentum grew after that win, and then every game.

I felt like we just refocused on what we needed to do. I'm proud of Maddy and our seniors that helped really get our team back together on the same page and I'm proud of every single player on the team that chose to go in the direction of getting better. Hannah, every single player, KK, AD, you can name all of them, Nat, Kylee, all of them just stepped up and decided to take -- instead of being I, less I and more we, what can we do together to try to find a way to get better, and that's what they did.

It's been such an incredible road, the process, the growth. That's what I love as a coach, to see where we are now from that moment and what you're speaking on. It's been just tremendous. I'm really proud of them.

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