

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Louisville vs Michigan

Friday, March 27, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Jeff Walz

Elif Istanbuluoglu

Tajianna Roberts

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll start with your opening statement.

JEFF WALZ: Thank you. I want to start off first by saying what a great experience this has been so far. Everyone here in Fort Worth has been absolutely first class. Everything has been handled fantastic. It's been a really good experience for our kids, and we're looking forward to a great basketball game tomorrow with a very talented Michigan basketball team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll now open it up for questions.

Q. Jeff, you made some comments a few weeks ago just talking about how you felt like your team was a little bit overlooked nationally.

JEFF WALZ: Let's -- I didn't say my team. A bunch of teams. I talked about how we stick with the narrative and beat a dead horse was exactly I think my quote.

ESPN when we start the year, we're going to find the kids we want to cover, and then if someone elevates themselves, I know it's expensive and it takes some funds to maybe go do something on that kid to showcase them, and we normally don't do that.

So, unfortunately, I think we miss out on a lot of talented players that have come through our game, new players, each year. So that was my quote. I mean, for us we don't have personally a star, so even when we got to sixth in the country or seventh, there wasn't much to say, because



there wasn't a deck already built to be able to showcase our players.

Q. I'm wondering if you felt like now that you're here in the Sweet 16 that's kind of continuing, that narrative?

JEFF WALZ: I think they're trying to make up, find some new stuff to do. You kind of have to since we're one of the 16. This time of year doesn't concern me. We're going to -- anybody that's still playing, they've earned their way into this. People are going to hear more about it.

I've been in this game for 32 years now, and you know, I feel I've got the right to speak on it. Because I have spent 32 years of my life in women's basketball. I've just always tried to push to hopefully grow our game.

We do wonderful features on players, but we just don't expand them when a player steps up during that season and deserves it. Kymora Johnson, I have said for this entire year is one of the best point guards in our league, in the country.

If she hadn't done -- if Virginia hadn't done what they had done and got themselves into a Sweet 16, ESPN hadn't done crap, because it would have taken maybe some effort and some money to go do something, do another feature on a kid or showcase that kid.

So that's where I think we miss in women's basketball. There are so many great players, and unfortunately, we don't talk about because it's not our narrative. Let's stick with it. We're just going to be narrow-minded, and unfortunately, I don't think it helps grow our game, yes.

Q. This question is not related to it being just after 7:30 in the morning even though it is just after 7:30 in the morning, but Cori Close yesterday made some comments about how with all the changes in college basketball, with NIL, portal, keeping teams, she's more tired than she's been in two years. Can you relate to that?

JEFF WALZ: I'm friends with Cori. My favorite line, I would tell her, if you don't like your job, find a new job.



Everybody -- I mean, I'm listening this morning at 4:20 as the workers outside my window at the hotel in the street are working. I mean, you choose your profession. If you don't like it, find a new profession. It's what I say.

Yeah, I mean, of course, it's a lot of work, but we chose to do it and we get compensated for it. I mean, I don't think anybody is going to feel too sorry for us that you might be tired. I'm tired too, but who is not?

What time were you all up? You know, it takes a lot of people to run an event, and I know everybody has the answers of how to fix it. It's like being a coach. Every fan can tell me exactly what's wrong with my team, okay, and how to fix it until you, well, why don't you come to practice and watch what we do? Our practices are always open. Ah, nah, I can't make that. I'm having coffee with my friends, or I have lunch every day.

I love Cori. She's great. We are friends, but we choose to do what we do. No, I mean, if you don't like it, find a new job. I hope that wasn't too harsh. God darn, aren't you all tired too? We all work our ass off.

Cameron, first time I've seen him in about six years. Is this your first event you've worked or what? (Laughing) I'm so sorry because I didn't reply to his text, because I wasn't sure who it was. No? Okay.

Q. I'm curious, what has it been like to see them grow over the last two years and how much have you seen them step up into the roles they've had to be in for you guys to be here this year?

JEFF WALZ: Yeah, I'm really excited for them. It's a really good group that was thrown into the fire early as freshmen, and there were a lot of expectations. I feel they've continued to get better every single day, every game.

It's been a lot of fun, because there have been the ups and downs. There have been some times where I'm pushing them a little harder than they probably are used to being pushed. Then they're also learning how to play with other really good players.

I think that's where they've really showcased this year what they're able to do. Throughout the year I think we've had six players that one time or another, six different players, that have scored at least 20 points in a game.

Our team is at a point where it's, like, hey, if it's your night, we're getting you the ball. If the match-up favors you, we're going to you.

It's never, well, I'm the leading scorer, and I think they've

learned that. That's one of the things I've preached to them about, because they all have aspirations of wanting to play after college one day.

I tell them, I'm, like, what WNBA coaches and GMs, what they want to be able to be sure of is that you know how to play with other good players. You might be the best player on your team, but you might be a high-volume shooter. Can you score 15 and only have to take nine shots, ten shots? Or to get those 15 are you shooting 23 and 24 times?

I think our players are learning that, and they're able to showcase that, hey, we're able to play with other good players; then when it's our night, when it's my night, it's my night. But they're not selfish and always wanting it to be their night.

Q. Jeff, both of these teams, you and Michigan, are really led by these sophomores. You've had a lot of good -- success with younger players on the bigger stages before. What do you think -- how is it different when you're a sophomore versus a senior heading into these big moments, and how do you as a coach help your players through that? What are you hoping to learn from your team?

JEFF WALZ: Yeah, we're at a point in the year now where I just think it's the next game. Sure, it's a big game. There's no question about it, but I don't think they're feeling the pressure. If somebody wants to say it's pressure of I'm only a sophomore, what do I do? It's, like, hey, I'm here playing.

Youth is wonderful because they don't sometimes realize what they're really doing, what they're playing and what this means to be one of 16 teams left. I'm looking forward to it.

You know, there's seniors that are playing in it for the first time that they probably have a little more pressure on themselves they feel because it's my last time.

You know, I try to make sure I educate our kids on the fact that it's not easy to get here. It's not easy to get to the final 16, so don't take it for granted. Enjoy every single moment we're here. Take it all in. You know, walk around, make sure you look at things, you look at all that's being done for this event because there's no guarantee you're getting back here.

So I think as a senior, sometimes you feel a little bit more pressure because you know it is your last opportunity.

Q. Jeff, obviously you guys have been one of the more

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consistent programs in the ACC being able to get to this point despite changes and portal and roster turnover and all of that. What do you feel like has allowed you and this program to have the type of staying power that you've been able to have and the consistency you've had?

JEFF WALZ: Well, it's a lot of work. It's good staff, good players. You know, we take a lot of pride in the character of the kids that we try to recruit, ones that want to work, ones that are going to get in the gym.

I think our culture that we've established over 19 years, you know, we've had a lot of success within our league, but even on a national stage. I don't think it's just the ACC that we've had success. We've done it on a national stage.

When you take a step back, which you don't very often do as a coach, but when you actually look at things and I'm sitting down with my staff, because Steph Norman has now moved on to Arizona State and is doing great things there.

She was with me for 18 years. We talked. It's, like, we now have had the opportunity to play in 17 of these. COVID took one year and then another year, our third year, we didn't make the tournament. We've had the opportunity to participate in 13 Sweet 16s.

We've got friends -- I've got friends that have coached in this business for 20, 30 years that have done it once or twice or are trying to get back to it. It's hard, but we've been very fortunate and blessed to have the opportunity to do it as many times as we have, but we never take it for granted, because I do realize how hard this is.

I make sure our kids know, and we push our kids just like everybody else does, but you're really trying to find the right mix who is willing to possibly give of themselves for the betterment of the team. We've been fortunate to find that since we've been here.

Q. Jeff, Mackenly talks about how she likes to play physical, aggressive. I think you called it that bully ball mentality. How would you describe her on-field personality versus -- sorry, on-court personality?

JEFF WALZ: It's spring football time. I know. It's spring football (laughing).

Q. Exactly. Her on-court personality versus how she is off the court and just being a leader for the locker room.

JEFF WALZ: Mack is a sweetheart. I told her mom and dad that if -- I've got three girls myself, and if they grew up

to be like her, they would be top-notch. I'd be thrilled. She's as giving and caring, compassionate as any player I've ever had off the floor.

Then when she steps on the floor, she's as competitive, as physical, but she does it still having fun. It's one of the things I've tried to get a lot of players that I've coached here in the past to understand. It's okay to have one personality on the floor and one personality off the floor. Truly that's what Mack does.

She's always got a smile on her face. You know, we preach in our program you only get one opportunity to make a first impression, so make sure it's a great one. She absolutely has conquered that. I mean, when you all get the chance, if you haven't talked to her, I mean, just watch her. She'll be up here today. I mean, she's got a smile on her face. She's always complimentary to her teammates.

Yeah, she's a wonderful kid.

Q. What kind of threat do Elif and Laura pose when they're together on the court?

JEFF WALZ: They both have the ability to stretch the floor. They can both shoot the three. Both being international players and know how to play behind the 3-point line. They pass the ball extremely well. They can handle the ball. That's really been a big part of our success is having five players on the floor where all five can score.

All five have the ability to shoot a three and make a three. Obviously Taj is probably going to take more of them, Imari Berry, than maybe Mack would, but Mack has the ability to step out there and shoot it. Laura does; E does.

When you have a four, five player per se, that's just the numbers that everybody gives them, that can stretch it out and shoot it, it spreads things out for everybody else, gives our guards an opportunity to drive.

It's been a luxury for us to be able to have those two on the floor this entire season.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck tomorrow.

Student-athletes today are Elif Istanbuluoglu, Laura Ziegler, and Tajianna Roberts. We'll start with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Elif, Jeff has talked a lot about how he feels like that summer and participating with the Turkish league really helped you. What did you take from that experience that has enabled you to have the season

that you are having right now?

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Spending the same court with the pros, I feel like the level that I see, I was, like, yeah, I want to go to that level, and it made me realize, like, what am I supposed to do. And having my coach with me is also, okay, that's what I want, and he knows, and he pushes me every day.

Again, sharing the same court with them, the vision, their experience, it's not the same way you're watching on TV. It's actually -- it's a privilege I think, and it was a great experience to be with them, and having Coach Walz there with me also helped me because he was there with me all the time.

Again, in the basketball court he was coaching me still, talking to me every day, what I need to do to get to that level, so it was special.

Q. Laura and Tajianna, I'll ask you this: Coach was in here a minute ago talking about how when all five players on the court can score and pass and shoot from three and one person can have the night one night and another the other night; talk about what that has meant for you guys getting to this point that everybody can contribute and do it?

LAURA ZIEGLER: I think we talk about it all the time that we have five people on the court, every time they can score. That's our foundation. Like, we always are dangerous.

From my point of view, I would hate to scout us because we know how we scout. We always have that one or two people that we kind of try to take out and say, they won't shoot or they won't do anything behind the perimeter. You can help a little bit more, but you can't do that with our team when we have five people out there that can score behind the three.

So really, it makes it easier for everyone on the court, too, because it's more difficult to double-team, triple team, do whatever to be heavy and help. So when we're out there and everyone can pass, everyone can score, it's fun. Like, we just get to play with each other in a different way. I love playing with five people who are just smart, who can do everything. We can read each other.

It's really fun. It's a privilege to play with a group like that.

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: Yeah, I kind of agree with everything Laura said, but I think as well it's a relief in a sense, if I don't have it going that night, my shot is not falling, my job is to get into the paint and get it to

somebody who is scoring.

I think there's not been a day where all of us, all five of us, have been clicking, but there also hasn't been a day where none of us are clicking.

Like Laura said, it's a privilege. It's an honor to be able to play with so many talented players, because not even just the five on the floor, but those people coming off the bench as well. It's just no break.

You sub, and like she said, there's nobody you cannot guard. I think it's just, like I said, a relief. If I don't have it going, somebody has it going, and I think we find excitement and joy in somebody else scoring. It's just fun to play with. Like she said, we're a nightmare to scout.

Q. For all of you, I wonder if you could talk about Imari Berry and her evolution this year and what it's like having a player like that coming off the bench? Laura you're laughing, so I'm curious.

LAURA ZIEGLER: I'm laughing because I love that question. Because Imari Berry, she's a baller. She got a feel for the game that you can't see. You either have it or you don't have it, and she does crazy things all the time where I'm looking at her and I'm, like, you did not just do that, and she makes the shot. I'm, like, well, whatever; I'm going to run back on defense.

She's amazing, and I don't think we talk enough about her passing either, because she can score and does all sorts of highlights that get put out there to see, but she's a really good passer too.

We sometimes get on her for passing too much because of the way she scores the ball. You have the team at practice or a game be mad at her and say you better shoot the ball next time because she likes to pass. She's very selfless.

She always brings the energy, too, which I know I lean on a lot. She's a great teammate. She's one of the best out there. It's just so much fun playing with her.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Yeah, we have an inside joke with me and Imari. I'm, like, that's your role; I'm just in it. She does something crazy. I'm, like, that's your role; I'm just in it.

She's one of a kind definitely. She can shoot, she can pass, and she's an awesome person. She's so fun to be around.

I feel like in the court whenever she does something, we're, like, oh, my God, and she just makes it casual. Okay, I

guess.

LAURA ZIEGLER: I sometimes catch myself passing the ball and standing and watching because she's doing something. I'm like how is she doing that? Wow. I better go rebound in case she misses. You have to. Otherwise, Walz will yell at you, so... (laughing)

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think as her fellow sophomore and seeing her evolution from us being freshmen to this year, it's really so surreal. She's made the biggest leap that I think anybody has made. It's so amazing to see just how well she's flourished this year.

Like, her confidence level, just seeing it, you can tell in her energy, the way that she -- like the way she represents herself. She's so confident in herself. I love seeing that just from seeing her last year, and I think she's made so many strides mentally.

She's a lot stronger mentally. Can't nobody knock her smile. She's going to bring that energy regardless. We could be in a dead serious situation, and she's always going to find a way to make you laugh if you are down. Like they said, she's just an amazing person off the court, and I think that's a testament to how she plays as well, because it's just so enthusiastic and with a lot of excitement.

So I think the biggest thing I love about it is just her growth and me being able to see it.

Q. Going back to her freshman year, was she --how has her confidence grown exactly? Was she more humble her freshman year? More timid? Can you describe her freshman year jump to now the confidence she has as a sophomore?

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think it's a combination of everything. You know, we're freshmen just trying to figure out what your role is and what you can be for this team. I think last year, you know, we had a lot of seniors, so she was more on the quiet side. I think this year she just is more comfortable with being who she is.

I think on the court that translates as well. You know, she's a humble person in itself. She still is even with all the amazing things that she does, so I think it's just her confidence and knowing more of her role in a sense.

Q. Obviously Michigan has a really good sophomore class, as do you guys. Their top two scorers are sophomores; same for you guys. How do you feel like y'all stack up, and what's the scouting and defending those two players?

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I would like to answer this. Yeah, they have a great sophomore class, you know, and their two top scorers, but also Holloway, she fits into that.

I think we have the same thing as well. We have a great sophomore class. We have me, Mackenly, and Imari Berry. So I think they're a great team overall; we're a great team overall. I think the match-up is going to be great, and I'm super excited to see what tomorrow's game brings.

They're great players, but we are great players as well. So I'm just super excited.

LAURA ZIEGLER: Yeah, I think they're a team that just play their role really well. We talk about Olson and Swords, but everyone knows what their job is and they do it really well. They're a high-scoring team. They average a lot of points, and they force a lot of turnovers too, which are things we have met in the season already.

We know how to play that. We'll be ready for that, but they're a really good team. We're at the point of the season where there are only really good teams left, so it will be a really big game tomorrow. I'm very excited.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: What you all said. Good job.

Q. Walz was just in here saying that sometimes when you're younger, you don't -- maybe as a sophomore you don't understand the gravity of this moment and how hard it is to get to a Sweet 16. Laura, I was wondering from your perspective what this means having transferred into this program and knowing that, final ride.

LAURA ZIEGLER: I talked a lot about that the last couple of weeks because I think I understand that perspective exactly coming from a mid-major. I know how difficult it is to get to the NCAA Tournament, first of all, but even getting to the Sweet 16 because we have to win our conference pretty much to get anywhere near that.

It's just amazing. I know how hard that is. I've been around a lot of great college players who never got the chance to do so, and now you are in an environment where that's the standard. The Sweet 16, being with Walz, that's the standard.

It's great to be around that, because you want to win, but I think the people I'm around by now, they're so used to winning, which is why I wanted to come here, but I definitely have a different perspective on it because I know how difficult it is.

It's been my dream for so many years getting to be in this moment and play in this, but it's difficult and very few players get to do it.

So it's something that I hope they take in, but I also know they have years in front of them where they can do it again, and it's going to be fun to watch, because it's a very special group. It's still quite a young group too. We have a lot of sophomores, as we talked about. Freshmen too. It's amazing, and it's going to be fun to see what they do the next couple of years.

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