

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Semifinal - North Carolina vs Duke

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels

Courtney Banghart

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll have an opening statement from Coach Banghart and then we'll go to questions.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Thanks for being here today, guys. What an exciting event already, to have some of the best teams in the country going at it. Really exciting for us, as you all know, Reniya Kelly is from about 15 minutes from here. She's from Hoover, and she's had a great year for us and is a great part of our team. Just a neat story that here she is getting a chance to play in front of her home crowd.

It's an event we know. It's the second time we've been here in four years. It's an opponent we know. At least in the first round and in the second round, most likely. It all begins, which is super exciting.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. The first one is kind of what you are saying, how much does it help playing an opponent now that you obviously are very familiar with and such in Duke? Second one is a bigger-picture one. The portal is open, which seems the dumbest thing ever since you're in the middle of playing in a tournament right now, 16 teams left. What would you as coaches like to see the timing of this be? Opening it right before Sweet 16, to me, seems almost asinine.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Where do you want me to start? Which one? I forget the first question, to be honest. Oh, playing Duke.

Yeah, what's helpful is, it's quick turn-arounds because you don't know who you are going to play until right before. And so to have a quick turn-around or a team you've



already played that there's a comfort there that's helpful.

But, you know, to play in the Sweet 16, there's just no bad teams. So you might have more familiarity, but familiarity doesn't win games, right? So I think from a prep standpoint, there's a little bit more comfort, both sides, as well as players having more familiarity with rosters and things like that.

It doesn't make the game easier, and that's what makes it so great.

As for the portal, the timing is tricky no matter when you put it because summer school starts up in a lot of places in early May. What was happening is people were transferring and then when they get there, they can't get into summer school and, therefore, they can't be eligible to play that year. So in order to get into summer school and to have all that taken care of and giving people the amount of time that they would need to get into the portal and to visit and to make their choices, apparently it butts up against some things like that for academic reasons, and for people that have invested in summer schools, and then they can't get their kids to take the classes that they need to be eligible.

It has more to do, I think, with the academic calendar and our season than it does trying to put it -- no one wants it during the Sweet 16. No one wants it in Elite Eight. No one wants it in the first round of the tournament or the season, but our season is so long that there's really not a lot of other choices, given the summer school component for eligibility.

Q. You've talked about how the ACC can be a gauntlet in the regular season be, and really you have to win at least 12 games to even have a shot at winning the regular season title. Eight teams are in the tournament. There's four here now. You are one of them. How does that conference slate really prepare you for this stage, not just the familiarity of playing Duke, but sort of going through all that?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, just tremendous. I was surprised that we only got in eight teams. Now you have



four of them still playing. The Big 12 -- or the Big Ten got 12, and they've got how many playing? Three, right? Do the math. The ACC has been an exceptional conference all year. It's been really great for us to play against all different styles, all different -- they've all been really close.

We feel battle-tested. We felt like when we played West Virginia, we had been prepared by the elite guards in our conference, so we give a lot of credit to the other teams that we played to prepare us for that win.

Then when we played Oregon State, they had great size, and we've got a lot of great size in our league. So, yeah, to your point, the ACC has been -- they should be celebrating, as I know they are, the success of these programs because they've been integrally a part of the journey for all of us.

Q. Courtney, the last few years against Duke, you guys have played in a lot of close games and then this year, the ACC made Duke your only repeat opponent as well. I guess because of that adjustment and change, how much does that add to the significance? Obviously, this is the NCAA Tournament game, but even in the regular season, how much did that just kind of add to, I guess, the significance and the weight of some of these UNC-Duke games?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I don't know if that adds to it, other than the fact that these are traditionally have been two of the heavy weights in the conference, right? That wasn't Kara or I's doing. We're just in charge of it in this moment.

So I think if we were playing NC State, we would have the very similar answer, right, is that there's been a lot of coaches -- or in our case one -- who have come before us that have created the fact that these games matter because both teams are always good. That's what makes these rivalries so special.

I think the Duke-Carolina rivalry is so much bigger than me or this team, and that's what makes it so fun too, but I don't think the restructuring of the conference in terms of -- I think Jeff Walls has been pretty vocal about, you should play everybody one time because that gives you your true tournament, your true champion, as opposed to some teams play people twice, which is an imbalanced schedule there. That's way outside of my decision-making.

I think it's a fact, I think, that these two teams have been so good for so long, and it's Kara and I's turn to make sure we take care of the rivalry with respect, integrity, and toughness.

Q. I want to ask about the turnover battle that seems like it's going to be a key part of that game. What's the key to winning the turnover battle tomorrow? Also, what are your feelings of playing an ACC team this early in the tournament?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Well, with these big conferences that's the only way, right? I want teams to be seeded where they belong, and whoever you play, you play.

So when the conferences were a lot smaller, you had four major or five major power conferences. It was a little bit easier to shuffle around. This is what you get with big conferences where there's so many heavy weights.

That's fine to me. We're a 3 seed. We're playing a 2 seed, and all the 2 seeds are good, and all the 3 seeds are good. It doesn't really matter who.

In terms of the turnover battle, that's always a good statistic to care about. Like, if you turn the ball over, you're not only giving up your offensive opportunity to score in that singular possession, but you are giving the other team a chance to score against a non-set defense. So that's a statistic that both sides -- it kind of is a double whammy if you're the team turning it over, and it's a double positive if you are the team who's creating the turnover.

These are two of the elite defenses in the country. We've been able to generate turnovers at a rate that we're proud of, which has helped. It will be key for -- the ball control will be key for sure because of the fact that you want to make sure you're getting opportunities to score in your possessions and not giving the other teams opportunities to score against a non-set defense.

Q. That West Virginia game, a similar kind of dynamic, do you think it's going to help you?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Whenever you watch back your team and you watch them play, and in this particular, when you prepare for a team like Duke that you've played before, you get to watch yourself play against Duke rather than all the other teams play against Duke, or whoever we're playing. What's good is I think we're better. They are too, and that's what should happen. When you watch the game back from the first game or even the second game, like how we handled pressure was not good -- not as good as we did against West Virginia. We've just gotten better. So have they watching them in the ACC tournament versus watching them in preparation for our second game. Be.

That's what's great, is when you have good teams that have continued the journey of being good is what's made

for TV and why our game is so strong.

Q. I want to ask a little bit about Alyssa. You have played Duke twice this season. First time she was in the game; second time, she was out with a knee injury. What is her impact going to be tomorrow in the offense and also keeping Duke from scoring as much as they can?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, for sure. When we didn't have Alyssa and Reniya, the second time we played them, those are kids that typically, in the biggest battles that we play, have had a pivotal role. Also, they play a lot of minutes. So it helps with the fatigue, right?

You are taking 60 minutes, if you add the two together, at least probably more, 70 minutes, that were taken away. Then we had to -- other people had to play so many more minutes than -- maybe they had less rest and things like that.

So fatigue certainly settled in, especially towards the end of that third quarter, which is when the game -- when they went on an 8-0 run. And so, having her, not only is she kind of a relentless contributor on both ends, but it means that you have the experience, and you have the toughness, and you have the two-way player, and you also have the minutes that you can then take back.

So people can really be a little bit more rested. Her and Reniya missing the game was a significant story for us in that game, and having them back certainly is better for us.

Q. Just following up on Doug's question really to the portal. How did you and your staff kind of balance the transfer portal recruiting with game prep this week? Did you have people who were working the phones on Tuesday? Did you say, okay, after Wednesday, we're not doing any more portal work? How are you guys kind of managing the work?

COURTNEY BANGHART: You always look at your own roster first and figure out what you think you're going to have and what you are going to keep and all that.

Then you look at what you have coming in and how many spots you have and all that. So you certainly need to monitor the names. But if there's some that are monitoring it so closely and reaching out to everybody, that's not us. That's just not our style.

We're a little bit more targeted, and we're also -- it's not a race. If you are finding your fit, it's not a race. So I know there's an urgency and everyone is, like, oh, the portal is opening. Yeah, and usually things done in haste are not

always the most thoughtful things done. We are monitoring it to the point of knowing who is available that we think can help us, and we're going to do that in due time, but we get to promote that we're still playing basketball. So we don't have as much time as everybody else. That's a relevant fact, right?

We're probably not as active as some of the others.

Q. Coach, I wonder if you could address two things. First, you talked about this being bigger than basketball in some ways because this is literally probably the most premier rivalry in college sports. I know you're focused on the basketball part of that, but can you just talk about what that means to have these two meeting for the first time in the NCAA Tournament? Then the fact that you guys in a lot of ways are very similar in terms of both averaging about 70-some points, and your opponent is only averaging about 57. How does that make this matchup interesting in that you guys are similar in a lot of ways?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah. I mean, I remember when both Kara and I took over these programs. I think there was apprehension from some of the media about, gosh, I hope they get these programs back because of how much the Carolina-Duke rivalry is important.

When you take these jobs, you know that, and you hear it early. You sort of say, okay, yeah, it is important to put yourself and this program in its rightful place. Kara and I have done that to the point where we're now playing for the first time ever in an ACC -- in an NCAA Tournament. How cool.

I always go back to -- I have been in the league six years. I think Kara has been in six, five, seven. I don't know exactly how long she's been. There's been a lot of people who came before us that have made -- if this was just right now and it was just about Kara and I, I mean, five years is like -- it doesn't matter in the trajectory of our game.

I celebrate along with all the sports fans that have been watching so many Duke-Carolina battles throughout the years and that we're in charge of it in this moment. We did it. We got you guys an NCAA Tournament game between Carolina-Duke. I mean, if that doesn't get your blood going, you should check it. You should get it checked because it should be really great for the sport.

Q. (Off microphone)?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Quite similar. Two teams that are tough, fast, experienced, have found ways to win,



defensive-minded with toughness, and discipline, and accountability change directions quickly.

So I think that sometimes you play opponents where your styles are so different, and you try to say, well, I'm going to -- that becomes a chess match. This becomes a battle, right? You have to be able to win both ways to be sitting where we're sitting, but this will be more of a battle than it will be a this, then this, then this. That's what March is for. It's exciting.

Q. You talked about Reniya, and she's a player that grew up ten minutes down the road at one of the best programs in the country for high school. Just how have you seen her kind of grow from year one to year two and being a full-time force in the starting line-up?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I remember getting Reniya, and I knew what I was getting when I started her her first game of her freshman year. Then she got hurt and missed a bunch last year. She's exactly on the trajectory and the progression that I would have wanted and hoped for. It's been earned.

You know, I've been to Hoover High School many times in order to get Reniya in the Carolina blue. I thought she was the most improved player in the ACC. If you look at her statistics from year one to year two and you look at how she runs our team, how little the team has changed and how much better we are, it's because she's been in charge of it.

She's just an easy kid. She plays with great passion. She's an easy kid to support. Even the way she was able to manage that kind of a slight injury to then be back and kind of be full form and really help us beat the Florida States of the world, et cetera, as we've played over the last few games.

I know she's a crowned jewel of Hoover, and we're certainly glad that she's kind of taken over that role in Chapel Hill as well --

Q. Courtney, following along with the Reniya point, you played close to home when you were at Dartmouth. How important is it for her? She hasn't had her family come to as many games as a lot of people. Just to see when you were in your playing games, just to see familiar faces in the crowd, what does that mean for you as a player?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I went to school real close to home because that was back before you could even watch on your phones and things like that. So, the only way I was ever going to be supported by my community is if I

stayed close, and that was important to me.

When you still sell out Ivy League arenas, that's a big deal. I think Reniya is really beloved by our community, and Carolina fans wrap their arms around our players. I think she feels like she does have her family even though it's different than her biological family in Chapel Hill. To be able to have her high school community and some of the peripheral people that have been a part of building her be able to drive ten minutes and support her, again, if that's not -- if that doesn't put a smile on your face, no matter who you are rooting for in the game, then you should get your heart checked because these kids come from their communities, and they go make a major difference at their institutions. It's not often that they get to play in front of their home crowd.

Those times where it happens, it's really, really neat. Really excited for her.

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