

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

Friday, March 28, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels

Courtney Banghart

Alyssa Ustby

Lexi Donarski

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Duke 47, North Carolina 38

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by North Carolina Head Coach Courtney Banghart.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Well, obviously sitting up here after a loss is disappointing, especially when you hold your third straight tournament team below 50 points and you don't win the game. I don't know how many -- I'm not great at statistics. I don't know how many teams have held that many Power Five NCAA Tournament teams below 50, but it's not really a game you should lose, if that's the case.

We really didn't shoot the ball well enough, we didn't play through their physicality enough, we didn't attack outside legs well enough, we didn't play off two well enough.

So it led to what you're seeing here, 28% from the field, 27% from 3 and 50% from the free throw and you still lose the game by less than 10. It's pretty remarkable.

Yeah, I think it's better to answer questions that y'all need me to answer and use the time wisely that way.

Q. Ladies, I know losses suck but to have gotten to the Sweet 16 what are you feeling right now besides disappointment?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, honestly going to need some time to process, still. We were talking a couple of minutes ago and it never was a thought that our season was going to be over today.



So just the shock of that and knowing that we're not showing up for practice tomorrow definitely will take some time to process.

ALYSSA USTBY: It's definitely a special experience, obviously so much work goes into building a basketball team and as long as the season is, I'm proud of how far we were able to come. But, yeah, stings.

Q. Alyssa, you've been in Chapel Hill for five years, what has your career meant to you?

ALYSSA USTBY: My career has meant a lot to me. I've probably put more identity into it more than I should, but I will be able to sort that out in the next couple of days, weeks, months, so on. I'm grateful for the opportunity to play at North Carolina, play for Coach Banghart for five years, seeing her every single day nearly all year long, I'm just really grateful for the experience and I wish everybody could have such a fulfilling experience that I had.

Q. How did the game shift when Maria went down? Seems like that's when Duke took control.

ALYSSA USTBY: Hard for me to say. I feel like I would have to watch it back. Obviously we need Maria in and we need her to produce but when Maria goes down, we have our small lineup and we have proven to be productive with that lineup as well. I think the people on the floor needed to take more responsibility, especially myself included on scoring the ball and making sure we continued to get stops.

LEXI DONARSKI: I think the thing about our team is we win in a lot of different ways. We have different people step up every single game. So, yes, we're more comfortable with Maria on the floor, we love playing with Maria but I still think we have pieces that can score when we have our smaller lineup in, too, and we just didn't do that. We didn't step up in ways that we needed to to go ahead tonight.

Q. Alyssa, with this being your last game and Lexi, how do you feel leaving this program in the hands of



young players like Lanie and Blanca? How confident do you feel in them?

LEXI DONARSKI: Honestly this group is everything that I could have wanted to finish out my career with, and I'm just so excited to be all of their biggest supporters in years to come.

ALYSSA USTBY: I think for Lexi and I we hope that our impact, whether it's infusing girls with confidence or having them learn strategic things from us can transfer down and they can pick up the torch and lead the program moving forward. That's all we could hope for as exiting seniors.

Q. Alyssa, we just watched this from the sideline but what makes them so tough defensively? You guys are also a great defensive team but what makes it so difficult to get your offense going against those guys?

ALYSSA USTBY: I think we have a great defense as well obviously but Duke is pretty disciplined. They are there on their rotations, they know to double. They are pretty sound defensively, so that makes us take tougher shots and alters our looks we are used to getting. But that's the game of basketball. Just because one thing doesn't work, doesn't mean the play is over. We gotta go down to the other end.

That's the beauty of it, you have to find other ways to score and I felt like we just weren't connected in that aspect of it today.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies.

Q. Coach, like you said in your opening statement it's disappointing to lose, but you guys got here. You managed to get here. Like the girls said, that's a feat in itself and you made history playing Duke for the first time in March Madness. What are you feeling knowing that this has come and gone?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah. There's two ways to look at life. You can be afraid of failure or you can be afraid of regret. I'm choosing that -- I never want to regret anything. There were things offensively that we you just weren't as sharp, obviously, when you look at Maria, she is +9, and her going out in this game was a real bummer, and kudos she tried to come back but she couldn't.

One of the things I'm thinking as I told these guys in the locker room, it wasn't enough. As a coach you have to navigate that moment with the legacy of what has been since June. And what has been since June is that I don't think anyone in this room has anybody in their life that speaks about them as highly as this team speaks about

their seniors. Over time that will become more important.

It's not today, right, but every time I meet with the players and show them film and talk to them about stuff, it's always, I want to do it for our seniors. There is something special that you've impacted people's lives where people want to do something special for you.

So I'm feeling gratitude for time well spent with that senior group, all five of them, but, yeah, I'm also having to navigate the wasn't quite enough, and that's the hard thing about sitting in this chair at this time.

Q. Courtney, I wanted to ask about your perspective on Alyssa's career and everything she has meant to Carolina?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I'm going to try not to get emotional, because remember she wasn't evenly chosen by ESPN as one of the top-100 players in our country; you're kidding, right? But I trusted my eyes. You can't replace -- there is not a skill set in the world that can replace a skill set of a relentless pursuit of excellence every day.

So that kid willed herself to learn to play basketball at an elite level. And how she is today, is how she was yesterday and the day before and the day before and the day before. So the fact that she wore Carolina across her chest, the fact that she cared about the right things and the fact that she is proof that relentlessness is a skill. I think we all think we'll just make everybody play hard. If it was that easy, everyone would do that. Her special super power is she has a relentless quest for excellence. When all the dust settles, she will know she is leaving her footprint at a place that's had excellence everywhere.

Q. Talk about the adjustments you had to make with Maria out? Obviously you had Alyssa at the 5 a good bit, and it was already going to be a physical battle inside; it just got tougher.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Again, it's always the minutes, right? A kid that plays you can lean on for 30+ minutes a game, now you can lean on her for 9. I know she played 15, but six of those you guys all saw how she was able to move. So now you have less minutes. Now you're asking Alyssa to play 40. You can't even get her any rest; right? Not only that but she is a rim protector, she is an elite rebounder, and she is your late clock; you can get it into her. We didn't have any of that, and Duke forces you into late clock. That was -- I tried to act like it was next man up, but when you lose Maria late in the game, you're up nine, that's a big loss.

Q. You talked about Alyssa's consistency and relentlessness and now going forward it feels like a page turning for your program because she is not going to be around. How do you keep those qualities of her in your program? Do you think the young group will carry those on?

COURTNEY BANGHART: You hope the winning is; right? You can't go to a national championship from never going to the Final Four, from never going to the Sweet 16. So going to two Sweet 16 in four years, there is a culture now, there is an expectation. It lets you speak louder. It lets you speak more directly, right, to your team.

But in college athletics now everything is a "turn the page." This particular year has two years worth of seniors. So you're not going to see it this pretty for a long time. This is pretty remarkable. There will be a wash out for a lot of teams of great talent. Our job as coaches is to put another great product on the floor.

It will look a little bit different for all teams, and ours. But I don't know if you can -- I think what Alyssa is leaving is she has brought her team to two Sweet 16s in four years. That winning now is -- that's a standard, right? I think that more so than I wish -- if I could bottle up her relentlessness, we would be undefeated. Hard to do.

Q. Coach, two things. Was Maria's injury -- it looked like an ankle?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think so. I chose to ignore it, but yeah.

Q. This doesn't seem like a fun game to coach in, and I don't mean that in a disrespectful way, but it's just so hard when shots aren't going down. I'm wondering, not every game is going to be 90-87, but is this a tough game because it feels like a grind from start to finish?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, especially people are looking at the scoreboard and didn't watch the game, you're thinking, oh gosh, as opposed to choosing to recognize these are two of the best defenses that have played over the last five years, and you add familiarity and roster understanding and system familiarity, and then you add the physicality, right? So you're trying to read how they're going to allow physicality, how you're going to allow post play, how you're going to allow body on the drives, right?

You know, that's -- that was a challenge, of course, as well. They're all fun, honestly, Michael, they really are. I know that sounds kind of odd. They're all fun because they require us to stretch ourselves in different ways, right?

Having the mental energy of beating West Virginia's press and staying in the attack, versus having to deal with Oregon State's size and more of a saggy team. They all challenged me difficultly and our team. They are all fun. I don't know those that love offense probably isn't the game that you're DVRing, or whatever you call it these days, but those that like defense, you should watch it again.

Q. Courtney, this goes a little off Mitchell's question, the next chapter and building off this year. What do you think specifically about this year worked for you all between the off season or throughout the season and things like that, like what kind of work for you guys to be able to hit the milestones that you hit?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Good returning experienced players, excellent leadership, young people that brought youthful joy and hunger, and a competitive group that cared about outteaming and outtoughing most of the time.

So they didn't have off Tuesdays, off Sundays; they were always on. The way they spoke about each other, and the way they committed themselves, I mean, culture is a thing. It is a thing, right? You hope to get it right, and coaches don't change dramatically, their roster changes dramatically. So there is an element of luck at times because we're all kind of hunting the same thing, but this particular group had the experienced pieces with the youthful talent and energy, and commitment of the younger guys. Then they chose to care about the right things.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations on a great season, thank you.

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