

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Semifinal - Minnesota vs UCLA

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Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Coach Dawn Plitzuweit

Grace Grocholski

Tori McKinney

Sophie Hart

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Minnesota head coach Dawn Plitzuweit. Coach, if you could talk about the journey that got you here today.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: First of all, we're really thankful that each and every one of you has come out to join us for this.

We're really excited for our group of young ladies, and this has been a journey that's been in the making for quite a few years now for this team, for a lot of the young ladies who are part of this. They've been with us for a few years. Obviously have some who joined us just this season, but certainly something that they've worked their tails off to get to a point where they're competing at the level that they are at this point in time.

And we have a great challenge ahead of us, certainly, with our match-up with UCLA, but we're really thrilled to have an opportunity to continue playing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. How helpful is it that you're playing a team that you obviously played in the Big Ten, with a somewhat short turnaround time, that you're aware of them already, as opposed to a new team that you haven't played or seen?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think it's interesting right now with the size of the conferences and the opponents that we've



had a chance, all of us have had a chance to play against. Yes, there's familiarity, but we also understand the major challenges that lie ahead.

So I think ultimately, this is a team in UCLA who has a great deal of talent, size, toughness. I think they're very, very disciplined, very well coached.

Yes, it's an advantage, but I kind of smirked because I think we already know what all those challenges or some of those challenges are at this point in time.

So it is something that at least we do know them, they know us. So I think it's kind of even at that point in time.

Q. One of those challenges might be a player like Lauren Betts. Just what type of challenges does she present, both going up against her when she's on defense, scoring against her, and then trying to defend her as well?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think it's a great point. I think she's a difference-maker on both ends of the court. I think a lot of times you look at what she does on the offensive end and there's kind of a pressure release with her.

We looked at one of the possessions in our first match-up against them where I thought for 26 seconds we really did a great job defending them. And then they threw it inside, and at that point in time, she made something very, very positive happen in a short-shot-clock scenario.

There's that one scenario. There's ball-screen roll scenarios, hand-off roll scenarios, post-up scenarios -- do you double? When do you double? Do you dig? Do you get back out? How do you rotate? Those type of things.

Then when you are in rotation how do you keep her off the glass? How do you keep her off the glass when you're not in rotation and then keep her off the glass when you are in rotation?

And then there's the defensive side of the ball, and it's not only the player that she's guarding but she has the ability to certainly make things happen and make it difficult to throw



the ball in the lane.

And so we have to alter some things that we do in order to at least try -- and that's just in the half court on both sides. Then you look in transition, and that opens up a whole other kind of things that you have to be prepared for.

So, yes, she's a major challenge on both ends of the court.

Q. Teams are using the WNIT and WBIT tournaments to fuel long-term success. How did you turn around from last year to making it to the Sweet 16 this year?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think that's a great question. And certainly when, in year one, at the University of Minnesota, when we talked to our administration, we'd have an opportunity to continue playing. We felt that was something that our team and our program really needed to have.

We played in the WNIT in season one, WBIT -- and I give our young ladies a lot of credit because there was a lot of disappointment in not making the NCAA Tournament last season. We really felt like we had a compelling case, and it didn't happen.

So then we went into the WBIT. We couldn't host the first two rounds because of conflicts in our facility. Hosted. And then played in a neutral site.

I believe our young ladies got better during that time. I thought our quality of basketball got better at that time. We got to continue playing and practicing and those type of things.

I think the tournament experience is something that you reflect back on and you really believe it does help grow your team's ability to understand what that all looks like. Yes, it's the play and it's all those kind of things, but it's also the travel and the preparation and different types of things in postseason.

So I think it was certainly was great for our young ladies to have that type of experience.

Q. You have a roster filled with kids from Minnesota. So to do this -- and Minnesota is a state full of talent; a lot of good, young, high school kids play in that state -- to hit the shot that you hit in Minnesota, have all these kids from the state, what does it mean for your program in the state of Minnesota basketball to be sort of taking these steps up as you've been growing in this program?

A. All I can think about while you were asking that question

is, I should have you repeat the answer to that. Because that's exactly what it is. We're really, really fortunate that we are in an area where we have great players in our backyard. And we've been able to have a roster at Minnesota with a lot of great players from our backyard.

We've also have players that we've extended, but the base of our program is recruiting young ladies right in our region.

What does it mean? There's a lot of excitement within our area, within our state, within our region and hopefully nationally for women's basketball. And just really special for the young ladies in our program that made the decision to come to University of Minnesota and rebuild this program.

Our program has had success in the NCAA Tournament, it just hasn't been for a while now. For those young ladies to make that commitment and make the sacrifices they've made, and then to have it come to fruition in front of their fans, in front of their family in The Barn was really something that's very, very special.

Q. You're mostly focused on your team but I know you have another team in the postseason that you kind of have your eye on your daughter at GVSU. I'm curious if you're going to be able to watch the game and what it's been like to share this journey with her.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: Yeah, it's really special. Our daughter plays Division II basketball at a school called Grand Valley State in Michigan. That was my first head coaching job. Our daughter was born in January of my first season as a head coach, so great timing there.

But 18 years later she decided to go back to Grand Valley and play basketball for a dear friend in Mike Williams who was just named national coach of the year.

Their team last year had a great run and ended up winning a national championship. They're the defending national champions and there's a lot of opportunities for them. They're in the Final Four tonight.

So great opportunity. Thank goodness for the Minneapolis Airport. So for all the recruits and people who are watching, we have the number one airport in North America. And so it really was helpful for me because after we were successful on Sunday, then was able to get to her game Tuesday night and get back for practice.

So yesterday morning flying from Pittsburgh to Minneapolis to practice and then to Sacramento. Put on some frequent flyer miles yesterday but certainly well worth it.

And we'll have a chance I'll have a chance to watch her today so I packed my Grand Valley clothes to sit in my room by myself and not be around anyone else and be a mom and watch the game, so I'm really excited about that.

Q. You made the Sweet 16 with South Dakota four years ago. The college landscape has changed really dramatically with now basically four super conferences and NIL. I'm wondering if you could talk about the challenges of doing it back then with a mid-major versus trying to do it now when there are still a lot of obstacles, even if you're in a power conference.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think that's a great question. So much has changed in four years, and certainly there were challenges then and there are new challenges now. I think regardless of where you're at, to be able to continue playing is something that is really, really special and something that's really, really hard to do.

We have a team of young ladies who are battling to give their best. That's what it takes in terms of giving ourselves an opportunity to be here and to continue to compete at the highest level.

So I just think it's so vastly different. I think it's really interesting because I would say I think it's a lot harder as a mid-major to do it now than it was four years ago.

I also would say I also think it's maybe harder now at the P4 conference to do it than it was four years ago, too. I can't speak on that exactly. But I just think it's very, very challenging. I think there are so many new things that you are navigating on a daily basis.

So for our young ladies and our team and our program and our university to have a chance to be here is something that we don't take for granted, something that we think is really special.

Q. I hope this won't bring back bad memories. You had that game in December against Maryland, where late-game execution sort of cost you that game. It seemed to me like that could be a little bit of a make-or-break moment for teams. How did you guys make it a "make" moment, if you will, and what did you learn from that?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think there have been opportunities in the last three seasons to embrace adversity for this group of young ladies. And I think each time that we have faced adversity, this group has chosen to use it as fuel to continue to help us get better.

So it's important that we can control what we can control. We can't go back and undo different things. We can use it moving forward. And that's exactly what this group has done, whether that's been through adversity of outcome, adversity of execution, whether that's adversity of injury, whatever the case is, this case has continued to embrace it.

And those are incredible things that you can learn and carry on in anything that you're doing in life. And so I think this group has learned some great lessons, not only in basketball, but for anything that they do.

Q. You have won a lot of big games, close games, this year. You've played really well. Now you're one of the last 16 teams. Do you feel like you just need to do what you do or do you feel like there's another gear required here, especially against a team like UCLA?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think that's a great question. And certainly for us, we are who we are and understand what our identity is and we have to play and that's with great toughness and resiliency, togetherness. And we have to have a find-a-way mentality, and that's who we are. So we're really not changing who we are at this point in time kind of heading into our match-up against UCLA.

Q. The play at the game against Ole Miss, when you were in the huddle there and you're trying to draw up what you need in that moment, did you know as soon as you called that timeout, we're going to Amaya and this is running? Because it sounded like on the broadcast that they said it's something that you had worked on in shoot-around and just how much faith you have in her in that moment to make that play?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: Another Minnesota kid, very good point. There are 3.5 seconds left on that clock, tie game, and in that scenario we ran an action sideline end-of-game scenario that we practice in our shoot-arounds.

And you know certainly that's our first option. If we can get it to that player, and that player was Amaya, that was our option number one. And then we give her some time and some space to make a play, and she certainly did that at a really high level.

There's a lot that goes into that. The cut, the execution, the screen, the pass, all of it. And then she has to make a really tough shot. That really was not an easy shot, but that's her shot. That's something that she loves to patent, a wonderful pull-up baseline jumper or just catch and shoot it from the baseline. So something that, yes, we had confidence that if we could get it to her that she would get at least a good shot and then kind of go from there.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Minnesota student-athletes Tori McKinney, Grace Grocholski and Sophie Hart. Sophie, could you give us a comment what it feels like to be at this point in the tournament?

SOPHIE HART: I think this is something that our group has worked really, really hard for. Been a few years coming. So it just feels really rewarding. We're excited that we get some more time to spend together as well.

THE MODERATOR: Fantastic. Grace, is this your first time to Sacramento?

GRACE GROCHOLSKI: It is.

THE MODERATOR: In terms of the games leading up, what has prepared you, do you think, the most about this team to play in this next round?

GRACE GROCHOLSKI: I think the biggest thing with our team is just togetherness. We've preached that all season. I think it's been showing here in postseason play, just staying together and playing together.

THE MODERATOR: Tori, I'm sure that the team had pretty big goals at the start of the year. Where does reaching this point sort of stand in those goals that you have as a team?

TORI MCKINNEY: Reaching the Sweet 16 was actually one of our goals. So we made it, so it's kind of exciting.

Q. I know you guys won the WBIT last year. How did winning that tournament fuel your success for this year, making it to the Sweet 16?

GRACE GROCHOLSKI: I think it just gives you more experience in a tournament-type atmosphere, kind of having that win-or-go home feel. And I think that was a big step for us.

Obviously our goal was to make it to March Madness last year. We didn't reach that. So we went into the WBIT saying we're here, we're going to win this thing. So it was a great way to just learn how it feels like to be in the tournament.

SOPHIE HART: I'd say we gained a lot of confidence as a group together, too. It's hard to kind of put that into words, but I think we trusted each other before, but we just kind of found a different level of that. And I think we also found a different level of work ethic to fuel our summer and our fall prepared us for this season.

TORI MCKINNEY: I think going off of what G said

especially is that our goal last year was to make it into March Madness. And, I mean, we were close, but obviously we didn't make it into that.

And playing in the WBIT was a great experience, and I think we had a lot of fun, built great memories, obviously won it. But then this year, we were like, okay, we don't want that to happen again. We actually want to play in the Big Dance this year.

Q. Sophie, sometimes pure bigs like to play another pure big, as opposed to maybe somebody smaller. You're going against another pure big, obviously, in Betts and you've faced her before. Can you just talk about what that match-up is like when you're going against somebody like that?

SOPHIE HART: I think I'm fortunate because I think the Big Ten, I think we have a lot of pure bigs, true 5s, is usually kind of what I call them.

But, I mean, more than that, she's a phenomenal player. I mean, great scorer, great offensive rebounder who can run the floor phenomenally as well. So I've got my hands full, definitely.

But I think it's more fun because you get to be a little bit more physical, I mean, not quite as touch fouls, if that makes sense. Like sometimes you can see that, I feel like, when you have smaller defenders, it lets you play a little bit more. And I'm a true back-to-basket post player. So I prefer that.

Q. Tori, you mentioned that the Sweet 16 was a goal. I'm wondering if now is a reset to reset your goals now? How are you guys approaching that?

TORI MCKINNEY: We talked about it a lot, about you kind of reach your goals. But once you reach them, it's like where do you go from there? Especially with this team, I think we've kind of all realized that we want to keep playing for as long as possible.

So, yes, although it was like our goal to make it to the Sweet 16, now that we're here, it's not really something that we have to reconsider, rethink about it. But we just want to keep playing for as long as possible. So we are going to go out and compete with every game that we have given to us.

Q. Sophie, maybe a little random, but I had the privilege of talking to Allie Marsh, the young lady who was connected with you guys through Team Impact. She talked a lot about how you were her favorite player, what this program meant to her. I'm curious,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

what did she mean to the program and how has she kind of inspired you guys along your run?

SOPHIE HART: We had the privilege of being with Allie for two years, I want to say, for sure. She's an incredibly tough kid. Been through a lot. But then always was there at games and showing up. And her smile is like the most contagious smile you'll ever see. The minute she smiles, I swear, the whole room lights up.

I mean, the family is just incredible. To kind of have her, I mean, again, she's an inspiration just in a little bit of a different way. But then also you could just tell, her and her family cared so much about our team. Their support was amazing. They really did feel like they were a part of our family, for sure.

Q. How much help is it that you've played UCLA before, the familiarity of this all? I know it was a while ago and you've played other teams since. But having that as your next opponent, less prep time than maybe other days since you know that team, I'm guessing, maybe than some of the other teams you could have played.

GRACE GROCHOLSKI: Obviously it's familiar being in the Big Ten and already playing against them. I think some people would say whether that's harder or not.

But I think obviously they're just a great team and we've obviously watched them play all season long with familiar opponents. So that helps, but they really can just do everything. So being able to just make it as tough on them as we can is what our goal is.

Q. UCLA has been here, I think, four years in a row. You guys are 12-1 now in the postseason with Dawn as your coach. Do you feel like that might offset some of that -- like you're both experienced in these do-or-die games?

SOPHIE HART: Yeah, we talked about the WBIT before, and I think we just kind of found that different level of confidence during that. And I think that's carried into this season of just a lot of trust within one another, you know? Not necessarily listening to the outside media, outside press. I think we have a lot of confidence in each other in that locker room, and we're going to go play.

Q. The success of the Lynx impacted girls basketball in the state of Minnesota, because this goes back basically to when you guys were little kids, I would imagine. How much do you think that inspired people and maybe impacted how good the girls basketball has become?

SOPHIE HART: I think it plays a huge role into that. They had that championship run there where they had four of them. I mean, growing up watching them -- Lindsay Whalen and Janel McCarvel and Sylvia Fowles -- I mean, you can go down the list -- Mo Augustus and Maya Moore, I think it impacted a lot of us, because you can see it -- you can see them doing it and doing it at a high level.

Like, I remember going when I was in fourth or fifth grade and watching them and just kind of having those role models in a way -- yes, they are phenomenal people, all of them. But then also, like, role models on the court of, this is how you can play. You want to talk about true post players, like, those are some of the truest post, pure post players I've seen. Modeled my game after them. So knowing and seeing those women, I think it inspired a lot of us and inspired a lot of the talent that came out of Minnesota.

TORI MCKINNEY: I would agree with what Sophie said.

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