

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Duke vs UConn

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Moda Center

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Kara Lawson

Kennedy Brown

Reigan Richardson

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



it was a good message.

Q. Big picture, when it comes to scouting Paige Bueckers, what stands out to you?

KARA LAWSON: I mean, she's obviously a really talented player. Pretty complete in every area. I guess what stands out is there's not a lot of weaknesses. You have to be really disciplined, really sound. Even when you do that, she's good enough to still make plays.

So I think it's just being able to do it the whole game and trying to make things as difficult as possible for her.

Q. With having so many underclassmen and so many freshmen on this year's team, what were some of the biggest challenges that you faced in trying to get them caught up to speed? Have you noticed them turning a corner, in which ways?

KARA LAWSON: I'm sorry, the freshmen you said?

Q. Freshmen and underclass players.

KARA LAWSON: I don't think there's one moment like, Oh, they're mature now. I think they each on their journey have grown and through the course of the season we've been able to add more to their plate.

In the beginning we had to keep things pretty simple in terms of our schemes. Now we're able to layer it more and be a little bit more complex. That's good because they've shown the ability to be able to handle that. We can change things, go in and out of things, which is valuable when you're advancing because the teams that you play, obviously the degree of difficulty increases. You have to be able to change things. You can't play the same way all the time on players and teams.

So their ability to be able to handle that has been good. They've been confident from the beginning, but I'm sure there's increasing confidence as they now are almost a full year into their career and have played a lot of challenging teams.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now is head coach from Duke.

Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement.

KARA LAWSON: Well, I don't have a long opening statement. But we're excited to be here, excited for the opportunity to compete, looking forward to the matchup.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Kara, can you talk about two or three keys to this matchup, the things that you have to do, the things you absolutely cannot do against UConn?

KARA LAWSON: I mean, for us, things pretty much, our keys pretty much stay the same. We want to make things difficult defensively for people. Want to make people take challenged shots. Don't want to give open ones. Want to control the boards. We need to take care of the ball. We've been some games good this year, some games not good this year taking care of the ball. Just play with great pace on both ends.

That doesn't change for us game to game. Obviously matchups, some teams make it harder in certain areas than others just based off of personnel. That's pretty much what we do, we go in and try to be really good in those areas.

Q. Is that sweatshirt in response to the press conference from last weekend?

KARA LAWSON: I just like the sweatshirt, yeah. I thought



I mean, that was one of the things we made sure we did. We played one of the toughest schedules in the country. Our non-conference we played a lot of the top teams. A lot of the teams we played are still playing that we played in our schedule.

They know what that level feels like, even though we haven't played every team left in the tournament, they know what that level feels like. That was really important for me with a young team. I didn't want them to get to March and all of a sudden be surprised at the level of play. They need to have already experienced that.

I think they're excited and looking forward to compete.

Q. You mentioned the tough schedule. How about the ACC, three ACC teams. How much did the league prepare you for this moment?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I mean, I think you see stylistically a lot of different types of teams in our league. That's helpful. There's obviously great players at every position. We've played against great guards and we played against great front-court players. Obviously the team we're playing tomorrow has great guards and great front-court players.

We're going to have to be prepared for that. I think just the different styles and the different game plans that we've had throughout there, as well, is helpful because we're able to say, Hey, this scheme is like when we played X or this scheme is like when we played Y or this player is like player X, this player is like player Y. There's a little bit of recall for them, which is valuable.

Q. I know the NCAA tournament is only one piece of a bigger puzzle as you're developing a program. Getting to this stage of the tournament, the second weekend, what kind of significance is there with that as you take over as a coach?

KARA LAWSON: I mean, it's definitely accomplishment. I don't know. I'd like to get to the next weekend.

I think for our group to be able to go on the road and win a game like we did on Sunday, obviously we were a lower-seeded team, I guess we're the lowest-seeded team left in the whole tournament. We know we're going to be on the road. We know that we'll not be the team favored in any matchup.

Being able to get a young team to be able to focus and lock in and be able to win that type of game, I think that, more than anything, than getting to a second weekend, was valuable and is something that kind of accelerates growth. Being in those moments, top 10 team on the road,

being able to win was big for our group.

Q. You only have four field goals in the first 15 minutes, then talk about how that game turned around so fast. Then Reigan's development as a player, what have you seen from her?

KARA LAWSON: In the Ohio State game you're talking about?

Q. Yes.

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I mean, we didn't start off the game really well. I thought their pressure impacted us and affected us. We turned it over. Obviously we dug ourselves a really big hole.

Once we got settled in, I thought we started to get some stops. That helped our offense, it helped us with our pace and getting out and running, then some shots started to fall for us. I think Ash made a three. Take it from 30-14 to 30-17. I thought that kind of gave us some confidence.

Reigan, it's been a continuous growth for Reigan. Obviously this time of year, if you have a big game, everyone wants to talk about it. But really for her, I didn't have her her freshman year. First year with us last year, was a starter for us as a sophomore, but not one of our main, main players in terms of offensive options.

We had a senior-laden team last year. She was more of a supporting player. An important player for us, but not a featured player on offense.

This year, as a junior, becoming more of a featured player for us. She's grown into that, being counted on every night to score and getting the better defenders now as a junior. She's continuing to just learn how to handle that. Certainly the last two games she's shot it really well. We've needed all her points.

I'm proud of how she's grown and developed. She continues to be, I think, one of the best two-way players in our league and in the country. Obviously there's a lot of good players out there, too. For us, she's really important to what we do.

Q. You posted back in 2021 a photo of you and Pat Summitt. You said, I wish you were here to see me coach. As you kind of meet these milestones in your coaching career, what do you think she would be telling you if she was still here?

KARA LAWSON: Like right now?

Q. Yeah.

KARA LAWSON: I think she would probably tell me to make sure that my players are really confident going into the game. They have great belief in themselves, because you have to have that this time of year. You have to have a high level of belief in what you can do as an individual, then what you can do together. That's the most important thing - more important than scheme or game plan.

Probably rebound. She was big in rebounding, so... I would say she would probably tell me to tell them that they got to rebound. I'll probably tell them that (smiling).

Q. A lot of common opponents between you and UConn. Is there anything you can take from that as you prepare for this game?

KARA LAWSON: I looked at it like that. I mean, certainly watched a lot of film on them. They're a terrific team, have a lot of weapons. I think more than common opponents, you look for stylistically maybe teams that do similar things that you do to see how they play against them.

But I haven't watched every game where there's a common opponent or anything like that. I think that probably just speaks to that they play a lot of hard teams and we play a lot of hard teams. From the looks of the schedule, we both try to challenge ourselves in a non-conference, play some of the top teams.

I know for us, that's a big reason why we're here. I don't know if they would say the same thing. We definitely want to make sure we challenge ourselves outside our conference.

Q. Back to the question about Reigan, was there anything particularly over the last week or 10 days that you noticed, maybe something that clicked with her, something that led to this kind of performance we're seeing recently?

KARA LAWSON: No. I mean, you can ask her maybe. Reigan is pretty steady. Like, you know what you're going to get from her every day. She's one of my most consistent players that I've ever coached really. Not that that's a long time, only my fourth year, so don't go crazy here (smiling).

Every day in practice, great effort, great focus, great attention to detail. She was like that when she came here. I didn't do anything to make her like that. She was like that. She came like that.

I think that's more the story than anything, is just over the

last couple years, every day she consistently has come in practice and worked and worked, shot before practice, shot after practice.

Had a good weekend. That's how this tournament is. Like, now we got to have another good day. That will be hard to do against this team.

Q. The last time you played UConn was here. However, they did not have Paige Bueckers. How much of a difference does she bring to that team?

KARA LAWSON: I think they're a totally different team than the one we played here. I mean, I think it's a different... I think Azzi was playing. I think Lopez was playing. Ducharme was playing, maybe. It's, like, totally different.

I mean, Paige obviously makes a big difference. She's one of the best players in the country. They're different to me than last year. More four guard obviously. Last year they had bigger players, at least when we played them. To be honest, I didn't watch them a ton after we played them.

Yeah, but she makes a big difference. I mean, no matter what team she was on, she would make a really big difference.

Q. I know the schedule is really busy, you have a hectic schedule. There are some really fun matchups this weekend. Are you going to have any time to watch games, see how things are going?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I mean, mostly I'll probably watch the Duke men's game tonight. I know they play Houston. I know there's games maybe going on right now. Clearly I'm not watching 'em.

Maybe. I mean, I don't know. It just kind of depends on when they tell me when my free time is. For the most part I spend my time watching the teams we're about to prepare for, making sure we have all our ducks in a row.

I think our team will probably watch our men play tonight in the Sweet 16.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much.

KARA LAWSON: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Duke are our student-athletes.

At this time we'll open it up to questions.

Q. Reigan, I asked Coach if she had seen a difference in you, if something maybe had clicked over the last week. She said you've been that steady player ever since you got to Duke, it wasn't anything in particular. Is that kind of how you see things or was there anything that changed for you?

REIGAN RICHARDSON: Yeah, I just feel like my confidence has been at an all time high going into the post-season. I feel like it's win or go home. I'm going to do my best to try to help this team win.

Q. Kennedy, you obviously are back in Oregon. What has this transition been like coming to Duke and getting this opportunity here?

KENNEDY BROWN: Yeah, I mean, super thankful for this opportunity to play at Duke. It's been a great two years. I've been blessed with great coaches and teammates. I've learned a lot along the way.

To be back, it's nice to be back in a familiar space, familiar location. We were here last year for a Thanksgiving tournament. Yeah, it's good to see some familiar faces.

Q. Kennedy, yesterday we talked to Taylor at Texas. What is it like getting to see her? Did you get a chance to hang out at all yesterday?

KENNEDY BROWN: I have not had a chance to see her yet. But yes, we are in communication like every day. We were roommates for two years, so super close.

She's a great friend. I actually did get to see her. I went and watched my younger sister play in the Big 12 tournament. I got to see her then and congratulate here on their Big 12 championship.

Q. Obviously leaders on this team. A lot of young players. How do you see your role as leaders on this team?

REIGAN RICHARDSON: Yeah, I feel like it's just the beginning of the season. I'm having to step into a role of becoming a bigger leader. I feel like whether that's leading by example or verbally, I've been trying to do a lot more of verbal communication, especially with our freshmen. Just trying to make sure, like, they're on the right page, they're staying focused, just talking to myself as well (smiling). I know that's pretty cliché. Just make sure I'm focused, as well. Just making sure we're all on the same page.

KENNEDY BROWN: Yeah, I think being a vocal leader has been really important for me this year, a role I've had to step into, something I wasn't super comfortable with at

the beginning of the year. Has become natural for me at this point.

Communication at this point, I think, is crucial to win games. Making sure I'm talking on both ends of the floor constantly, kind of being a calming presence for this young group, being one of the more experienced players on the team.

Q. When you look at film, what makes Paige so difficult to play against?

REIGAN RICHARDSON: Yeah, Paige is a great player, phenomenal. Scores on all three levels. I feel like the biggest thing for us is try and make things tough for her.

KENNEDY BROWN: Yeah, I think she has a really high basketball IQ, great reads, not a lot of mistakes.

Like Reigan said, make everything difficult, every catch, every read hard for her.

Q. When it comes to having so many underclassmen, freshmen on the team, what are the areas where you've seen them grow the most, especially in the post-season play?

KENNEDY BROWN: I feel like I've seen a lot of growth on the defensive end for a lot of them. Learning schemes for each game, because every game is different, really locking into the game plan for that specific team. Learning plays, the other team's plays. It's one thing to learn your own plays, but then having to remember another team's plays, what they're going to do, locking into that.

I think their pace on the offensive end, knowing when to push and when to kind of slow down. Okay, we don't have numbers, have an advantage here, kind of pull it back out. I think there's been a lot of growth in that, as well.

REIGAN RICHARDSON: I feel like since the beginning of the season, it was a little rough just trying to gel together and be able to play together.

I feel like the biggest thing for our freshmen, especially with coach Kara, she's not going to sugarcoat anything with us, she's going to tell us how it is. For our freshmen, I feel like I've seen them do a great job of handling that and being able to grow with it.

Q. Kara mentioned getting together tonight to watch the men's team play. Nothing new at Duke. What does it mean to have both teams advance to the Sweet 16?

KENNEDY BROWN: Yeah, I mean, not a lot of schools

can say that. It's really cool. We like to support every athletic team at Duke. So to see our men be successful in this tournament has been really fun. We're looking forward to a great game tonight, yeah.

Q. You talked a little bit about what challenges Paige poses. What other things do you see with this matchup that makes UConn a good team? Any areas where you think you can have the advantage?

KENNEDY BROWN: Yeah, I mean, they're like a well-oiled machine. I think Coach Auriemma has them prepared and they just function really well as a unit.

So being able to be kind of be disruptive and get some disruption into that flow that they like to play with, then pushing the pace for us I think will be important as well. That's something we focus on every game, though. Our game plan hasn't really changed. Give what you can when you're out on the court, push the pace, then we'll get subs in. I think our depth will be crucial for us, as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you both very much.

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