

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Notre Dame vs Vanderbilt

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

**Notre Dame Fighting Irish
Coach Niele Ivey**

Vanessa De Jesus

Cassandre Prosper

Hannah Hidalgo

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with an opening statement from Coach Ivey.

NIELE IVEY: Hello, everyone. Super excited to be here, to be in Texas, to still be dancing, to be part of the Sweet 16. I never take this moment for granted. I've been here five straight. This group is an incredible group that I get a chance to work with and just really proud of what we've accomplished this season and really excited for this opportunity tomorrow to play Vandy.

Again, just really, really grateful to be in this moment and to be in the Sweet 16.

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

Q. You talked about obviously being here with this group. With Hannah, Cassandre, but you had a pretty good turnover in this group. What does it say about this group to get back to this point and get another chance here?

NIELE IVEY: It speaks volumes of this team. Had three returners, Cass, Hannah, and KK, and an entire new roster.

This roster that -- the team that we have, they just really are connected. They've brought so much just joy for me. We have a ton of experience on this group, you know, bringing four grad transfers in, and the last several weeks



we've done a great job of really peaking at the right time and our chemistry is clicking at the right time.

This group is amazing, and I'm grateful to work with them.

Q. Coach, we've heard you say multiple times over the last couple of weeks that you really love coaching this team.

NIELE IVEY: Yes.

Q. What are some of the things that you see that we don't in games that has gotten you to a point of just really enjoying the ride that you've been on with them?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, the love that they have for each other. I think it's evident when you watch them, but for me, I watch it behind the scenes, in the locker room. They spend a lot of time with each other off the court. They're very connected. They bond really well.

Like I said, they're sisters. They've created a really special, unique bond, and that doesn't happen as quickly, and the fact that that's happened so quickly in the last several months for this team.

But they're unselfish, and I think you can see that on the floor. They just really care about each other. Again, they're family, and they've developed a really close-knit bond together.

Q. Talking to Iyana after the Ohio State game, she just said, Why not us? That's how maybe she defined this group. How have you seen this group adopt that mentality not just in March, but throughout the entire season?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, this group is resilient. They've established a confidence in themselves and in our group, in our identity. It took us a while to kind of really have that consistent identity. We were working through it a lot this season.

You know, you can see that they've really established that confidence they have in their individual game, but also that



trust and confidence that they've created amongst each other. I credit Hannah for that.

Hannah is somebody that comes in with that confidence. You can tell that they're feeding off of her energy. Everybody, again, has really developed that level of confidence. That's what you see, so that's why she's saying, Why not us?

Q. First off, I want to say your nails are awesome. I love those.

NIELE IVEY: Thanks.

Q. Going up against Aubrey Galvan, she's you, really confident in the way she plays. What kind of threat does she pose?

NIELE IVEY: A three-level scorer. Plays really crafty. She's really smart. She's had an incredible year. You can tell she has a lot of confidence. They have a lot of confidence in her. She gets the team going. She's a facilitator and also somebody that can really make plays off the bounce.

She does some things that -- it's fun watching her because she does play with swag and she's had an incredible year, and they feed off of her.

Q. Earlier this season after the Duke loss, it was in that presser, and the vibes have changed so much since that day in Durham. You talked a lot that day about wanting to get the team -- trying to put 40 minutes together and just being unable to put 40 minutes together. It almost seemed like you didn't know what to do to kind of, like, get together. So what did change? How did you pull it together after a rough stretch?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, I think adversity and challenges grow you as a coach, it grows you as a team. We had to go through that growing process this year. We had to trust in that process. Sometimes that was hard.

We were on the road coming off a tough loss versus Georgia Tech, had to go straight to Duke. Again, those moments are what define you, and I felt like we utilized those moments to get better, and we just got back to work.

We did a great job I feel like of turning the page no matter what happened. We had to turn the page and get back to work. That was my focus. I had to make sure and maintain the level of -- I had to maintain our vibe, our energy throughout the times that were rough.

After that we added KK. That's a big part of it. We were playing with six scholarship players at that time, and a couple of those players in the starting lineup, in and out of the starting lineup, G the game before had the flu, 'Yana inserted 'Yana in the starting lineup a couple games after that. Our adversity was tough, people not really recognizing that.

But then, again, just got a chance to get some consistency. KK being back with our team helped a lot. She knows our system really well, but having another available body, but also somebody with her level of talent, was a big -- was big for us.

Then we started building that confidence, that chemistry, that cohesiveness. I feel like the addition of her and learning from our losses helped us get to this point.

Q. When you have somebody like Hannah who is as talented as ball handlers and knowing when to reach and pick a pocket like that. As a coach and the coaching staff when your game planning your defense, how do you prepare for kind of that risk/reward of Hannah is going to go over it -- (indiscernible)?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I've learned how to allow her to be her. That's her superpower, the way that she defends. There's sometimes that she takes chances and we have to retake off of the chance that is she takes. Majority of the time she makes great decisions and great plays.

We've learned how to and the team has learned how to adjust with the way she impacts the ball and is disruptive. Everybody on the floor wants to play defense with her, so I think that's the biggest difference. The way that she defends. They all rotate outside of her, but she is a high risk, high reward. I knew that coming in, and I've watched her blossom and develop and she's gotten even brighter.

It's hard to even fathom that she is, because instinctively she just knows how to make reads. She studies her opponents. She's very, very smart offensively and defensively, but I think that's what I love about her.

I give her freedom to do what she does, because the reward is what you see on the court when she's averaging nine, ten steals a game or whatever it is.

Q. You were emotional after the Ohio State game, just being able to get back here given all the adversity you have faced. You've been in this situation before. I'm wondering how much urgency you feel to try and get past the Sweet 16 into the Elite Eight and make a push for a championship?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I always have that level of urgency, kind of having that experience the last couple of years being here. That stage is big. It's really hard to get back here, so that was the reason why I was very emotional because I got a chance to get back here with this group that no one thought was going to be here. It means more to me. It's sweeter for me to get back here with this team.

They've given me so much joy this year. I come in every day, they want to work, they're coachable, they love each other. It's just a different energy that we have. When you have joy with what you're doing in the passion that you have, and I have so much passion for Notre Dame, obviously, it means more.

Yeah, there is that hump I'm trying to get over, so I'm taking this very business-oriented. This group will be ready. It's been exciting to plan, to prep, but I'm excited to get after it.

THE MODERATOR: Student-athletes joining us today, Cassandre Prosper, Vanessa De Jesus, and Hannah Hidalgo. We'll open up it for questions.

Q. Hannah, when you are watching film and you're watching Aubrey Galvan play, what stands out?

HANNAH HIDALGO: She's a great guard. I just was introduced to her I think when I was watching Vanderbilt against Texas. I just realized, like -- I think my first thought was, oh, what grade is she?

Just for her to be a freshman and just being able to do what she does and lead her team is very impressive. She's very crafty with the ball. She knows how to get her team involved and also score the ball.

So I think she's a great guard.

Q. Hannah, there was an image going around -- a clip going around of you of Mikayla Blakes in AAU facing each other. What do you remember from those days, and how excited are you to go against one of the best?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I feel like my earliest memory playing with Mikayla was my senior year. It was a really big game for us. I went to Vegas Prep, and we played them ended up beating them.

It was a show. Two dynamic guards. I had to guard her the whole game. I think just her ability to do what she does, you know, the things that she brings to her team is so different.

It's exciting, because I've been playing against Mikayla for

a long time now, and I played with her at USA. It will be fun to now play against her at the collegiate level.

Q. Hannah, along those lines, with a high-profile match-up like that and one where you have some history, how do you guard against making it too much about that and trying to make sure that you sort of stay within yourself and the game plan and all that kind of stuff?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I think this whole game is just about playing together. You know, it's not about me versus Mikayla. It's about Notre Dame versus Vanderbilt. It's really just the way that we're going to win the game tomorrow is by playing together like we've been doing the past couple of months.

Just playing team defense, sharing the ball like we've been doing on offense is what's going to win us the game.

Q. For each of you, Coach Ivey was just talking about how it felt sweeter to get to this point because not a lot of people thought that you would. For each of you to clinch this berth, how does it feel to you, and is it similar?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I think it feels, I mean, amazing. Coach Ivey probably touched on it, but not a lot of people believed in us to get here. For me, especially coming back here with Notre Dame, Sweet 16, you know, we've been here five years in a row. I think this year is especially special because we came a long way.

I think we had seven transfers and then we were only three returners coming back to Notre Dame, so just to see the journey that we've had and the growth that we've had to be back in this moment right here is really -- I think it's just a great opportunity. It's beautiful to see our growth really as a team.

VANESSA DE JESUS: I would say I'm grateful. Coming into Notre Dame my first year, coming in not knowing what to expect. For us I just knew how much we worked since the summer with this group and how close we've gotten and these are like my sisters. Being able to play with them at the Sweet 16 just makes it even more sweeter, as Coach would say.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I would say in terms of nobody believing in us, I think we believed in each other and we believed in ourselves.

I give all glory to Jesus Christ because he's the only reason that we're here putting our faith in him. I feel like we're a big faith team, and I know Coach Ivey has talked about it a

lot, but we give all glory to Christ, and it's nobody but God.

Just to be in this position, I know for me I feel like looking at it now, I feel like the past couple of years I might have taken it for granted to be in this position because I feel like -- I guess I felt like we should have been in the Sweet 16 and we should have been winning.

So now I think this year it feels so much different, because I think I'm appreciating it a lot more. I'm more present where my feet are.

Q. Hannah, along those lines, how much urgency do you feel to be able to get past the Sweet 16 now that you are kind of soaking in every moment and knowing that every competitor wants to be able to move forward and play for a championship?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, of course. I guess we all know that's the biggest goal, is to get to the championship and to win it, but I try not to put any pressure on myself.

I think just continuing to do what I've been doing this whole year and that's trusting in Christ and just being present where I'm at and not stressing about the next game and just doing what I need to do and giving it everything I got every time I step on the floor and whatever happens, happens.

Q. Vanessa, on that roster turnover, is there anything in particular that you see as sort of the key to it meshing like it has?

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, I think since the summer, a big thing was our chemistry off the court. So we would just spend time together, whether that was at Kelly's lake house or just watching movies or playing Mafia together. I think a big thing for us was just that bond off the court, because once we had that, going on the court just made it that much easier. Just spending time.

With a new team, a lot of us being new, and just really valuing that time together.

Q. Hannah, since you mentioned that you felt like in the past you had maybe taken it for granted and you wanted to be where your feet were coming into today, how has that looked different than the past couple of years?

HANNAH HIDALGO: I have a lot more joy in being here. I don't take it for granted, you know, making it to the Sweet 16.

I guess I'm just more happy. When I step on the court, I

play with a lot more joy. I'm so excited to be able to be alongside of these women and playing with them and to be able to win together with this group of girls.

It just means so much more, and it's a lot deeper than basketball, I can say.

Q. Hannah, you talked about your history with Mikayla, but what's the toughest thing about guarding her?

HANNAH HIDALGO: She can score the ball, yeah, in so many different ways. Obviously we all know she's the No. 1 scorer in the country, but just the way she's able to put the ball in the hoop, it's unlike I feel like I've ever seen.

Like Caitlin type of level. She can score on all three levels, whether that's getting all the way to the basket, her midrange, or her three. Of course, that's always tough to guard.

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