

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - North Carolina vs UConn

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Dickies Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels Coach Courtney Banghart Indya Nivar Lanie Grant Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to today's press conference featuring North Carolina Tar Heels Coach Courtney Banghart. We'll start with your opening statement.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Sounds good. Thanks for being here, everybody. Really thrilled to be representing the ACC. To think we had, what, eight teams in last year and half of them went to the Sweet 16. This year we had nine, and five of them went to the Sweet 16.

So I think the strength of our conference continues to be on display. I just am proud to be one of those schools that have earned -- I think we can even earn a little bit more respect as we keep moving forward.

Just grateful. Rooting for all the other ACC teams to do their thing too. Obviously we know we have a significant challenge in front of us, and that's what you live for.

So I know we're excited about that and have a lot of respect for who is on the other side tomorrow.

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

Q. You're obviously familiar with UConn's Sarah Strong from her time growing up in North Carolina. During her recruiting cycle, how aggressive were you and UNC just pursuing her? What was that process like from your perspective?

COURTNEY BANGHART: It was awesome. I mean, I love her family. Obviously Allison played in the Ivy



League. I actually played at the same time in the Ivy League. For three years we went against each other -- or two years, I guess.

Then obviously Danny has been one of the better coaches in our area in North Carolina.

Sarah has been to my house. I spent a lot of time recruiting Sarah Strong. We played them last year in Greensboro. My kids, who are young, ran right up to her and hugged her and told her they missed her. It gives you an idea -- this was after the game as well. Then when we saw we were -- we would draw UConn if we kept winning my daughter said, oh, I get to see Sarah Strong.

Yeah, she's a special kid. It's a kid I've loved for a long time. I think she's a generational talent. It's been fun to support her. I've watched a lot of their games because I'm a Sarah Strong fan. You know, you never want to let a kid like that out of your state.

I thought we were really close to getting her, but obviously she made a good decision as well. There's no bad decision for a kid that talented.

Yeah, the recruiting process was -- there's few kids I know better than Sarah Strong and nor that I have more respect for.

Q. To follow up on that, what do you see as the biggest difference in her game last year as a freshman? I know obviously you faced her pretty early on in her career versus this year as she's coming into her second round of this tournament.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, I think she's starting to figure out how good she is. She's one of the best kids. She's really humble. She's very team-oriented. She's about as egoless as there is on the planet, right?

I think she's starting to really understand how transformational her game is at this level. I think she's the best player in college basketball, and I think she's starting to see that. So she's more aggressive kind of in all spots on the floor. She's a kid that sort of wants to fit in. I think



now she realizes her version of fitting in is just being better than everybody else, right?

She's better defensively. She's, again, more confident. I think she just is starting to understand the strength that is Sarah Strong.

Q. How do you process and talk with your team about being an underdog of more than 20 points? What does a path to giving them a good game look like?

COURTNEY BANGHART: We don't spend really any time talking about being an underdog. I think those are people that are sitting in some sort of basement or control room in Vegas somewhere who have never met me or my team, so I don't -- we don't really talk about the line.

I think we were probably the underdog against Maryland. I don't know, but I think the ACC has been the underdog all along. It's amazing that we get the four seeds and the five seeds all the time when we have more people advancing in the Big Ten, for example, year after year to the Sweet 16.

I think the underdog thing is sort of what we've -- until we can figure out as a league how to really show how the games in February and March aren't the same as November.

I don't think we spend any time talking about that. We talk about our game plan. I think the level of competitiveness you have to bring possession to possession against a team like UConn is -- the possessions are really valuable. I think they don't get as much credit as they deserve for how good they are defensively.

Not only are they elite offensively because, as Geno has said, he's had the best players in the country year after year, he's gotten them to defend really well too.

Just the value of the possession and how competitive you have to be with your concentration and your balance and your shot readiness and your ball control, right, and your lock-in to the defensive scout. You don't have a lot to play with.

We just talk about those things. What it's like to beat a team and to compete with a team that's going to give you formidable challenges minute by minute for 40 minutes.

Q. You mentioned the ACC. Felisha had some comments after the UConn game in terms of where they kind of always end up when they're seeded, whether they were underseeded, deserved to be there, or not. I'm wondering, as someone who knows her and obviously represents the conference, what did you

think about what she said and are there solutions?

COURTNEY BANGHART: You know, we've played -- I think I play South Carolina every year as well. I've played the No. 1 team most of the years I've been in the NCAA Tournament, which is I think now -- Matt will know more than me -- 13; I don't know how many times, right?

I think the issue is -- again, I'm not a Big Ten hater or Big 12 hater, whatever, but the Big Ten had 12 teams and brought three to the Sweet 16. They had 12 teams in this year and brought three to the Sweet 16. The seeding absolutely matters, right?

I'm not in charge of that, so I don't really get to have much of an opinion how that happens, but when there's a narrative to start the year that this is a better league, what happens is we cancel the ACC-Big Ten challenge, so now it's the ACC-SEC challenge.

11 of the Sweet 16 teams come from those two conferences, yet so many more teams go in from -- I think the Big 12 had seven in.

So I think you will play the No. 1 seed at some point in your region, and she's in that region. Her UConn is my South Carolina. That's just the nature of it. It's how soon you play them is when the narrative gets understood to a point where you are actually correctly seeded.

Again, I'm not in those rooms, but when the narrative starts with so many Big Ten teams ranked, it's hard to unrank them, because they don't play a lot of the other people.

The SEC and the ACC, my first two games next year are the SEC, right? We play more of those teams because they're more willing to play you. It's a long answer of saying I think it comes down to when you play the No. 1 seeds if you are a 4 and a 5 is sooner than if you are a 3 or a 2.

Q. What is it that makes UConn such a great passing team? They lead the country in assists again this year. Is there something about their offense that just lends itself to unselfish play?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think a lot of things. You've got really good players at every single spot. What I love about Geno is he doesn't sugarcoat it. He's had the phone numbers to the best players for the last 30 years. You put all the best players on a team, and there isn't a it has to go through only one guy.

So, A, they're really good; B, they can -- assists come by someone who scores the basket. They're passing to

someone who can score at all positions. Their assists are higher.

Then their system is such that they play with such great spacing because they can all shoot it and they are a really elite at their own skill set. He's started with talent, but had he to get the talent, and then he gets them to play with great spacing, he gets them to find the best shot, and he gets them to believe in their individual skill set playing to the strength of the whole.

Yeah, I think assists come from people that make shots, so the more shotmakers you have, the more assists you're going to have.

Q. How much do you feel like the success that the ACC is having in the tournament this year, not just with you guys and the top teams, but teams like Virginia being able to show out helps to combat that narrative, and how much do you hope or think it will help next year when they look back?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Last year we had only eight in, and we had four at the Sweet 16. I would have thought that would have helped for this year. So then we got nine in and have five, that goes from 50% to I think 56%.

I guess another year maybe we hope. I don't know. We just have to keep winning the games on our on schedule. I think when you look at the results, again, when you are -- if you follow the narrative of November and follow it a little bit less as the season goes on, the narrative has been spoken for you.

Our job in this role, me and the other coaches in our league, just have to continue to win the games in front of us, recruit the best talent, and coach the best that we can with the teams we have. Then we have to figure out as a coaching staff and as a league and as players how to get that narrative out a little bit sooner.

I think the postseason, the March success, I think is speaking for itself. We just need to ensure our seeds are correct so we can continue that.

Q. You played a really tough nonconference schedule. You've faced two of the No. 1 seeds already this year, UCLA and Texas.

COURTNEY BANGHART: And South Carolina in our exhibition game.

Q. Right. How did those experiences help prepare you for this?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think especially early on it helped because the standard is really clear, right? When you play South Carolina first out of the gate, there's a standard of, okay, this is a team that consistently has won and will be somewhere in that top 5.

Then you do a couple of weeks later and play another one and then a couple of weeks later another one. You get an opportunity to kind of really see the standard.

Then we've gotten better. We're the seventh youngest team in the Power 4, so we knew that seeing the standard early would help them not just hear me grate on them over and over again. They can actually see it.

I think we're better than when we played those games. We're more resilient. We're more connected. We've been through more stuff. Our players are better. We have better rhythm. And we're older. That sounds crazy, but when you are the seventh youngest team, three months is a long time.

I think it helped us a lot. Every game has its own challenges, and UConn presents a lot of them. I think we're better. I'm glad that we're playing this game in March and not in November.

Q. Indya has been the primary defender on some of the best guards in the country. What will be important for her tomorrow against Azzi Fudd? And also inside with Ciera and Harris and trying to deal with Sarah Strong and the team defense?

COURTNEY BANGHART: It's a tough team to guard. As was addressed before, it's not like you shut down one guy, and they're just going to keep trying to shove that round hole in a square peg. They have weapons all over.

So it's as much of an individual effort as it is holistic. You have to play -- you have to try to limit their strengths, which there's a lot of strengths. You have to do that over kind of possession by possession, make things more difficult, put them into plan B. There are a lot of analytics out there, so play to that.

You know, defending them won't be just about Indya. It will be about how well does each piece guard what they're trying to do, and that's what I'm talking about, that toughness. It takes an enormous amount of toughness possession by possession because you can't just lean on two. You need all five bringing that same level.

Q. Second round game against Maryland. First time all year you've had two 20-point scorers in the same game in Elina and Lanie. How is that performance

emblematic of the growth of growth of your guard group from some of the November games you talked about to now?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think it also shows the maturity of how we were able to play different ways. They've really guarded the arc. They weren't going to get beat by the arc, which meant we had some one v. one all over the floor and imploring them to attack that match-up.

They were good enough to attack that match-up. Other teams are willing to be more helpful and to takeaway layups, which means we've got three-point opportunities.

And so I was really grateful they were aggressive, but I was even more grateful that it shows that they -- there's lots of different ways you have to win to get this far. That was very different than the ways that we had won to go on that 13 out of 14 -- whatever the record.

I'm not great with the numbers, but however many games we won kind of in January and February, we played a different way. I was more happy with that.

Q. I know we've talked about the ACC. I was going to mention ACC one more time. When you think about this conference, I think sometimes you think of -- you think about how elite the guard play is, and a lot of the guards in this league go kind of overlooked at times. Taina Mair, Duke, and just so many others. As you've gone through the conference and played so many guards who are so different and so good at so many other things, how does that prepares you for this type of tournament and this type of match-up?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Especially when you think this is my seventh year in the ACC, and the guards that we've played against in those seven years, I mean, I have gotten better as a coach dealing with them, right? When we recruit, we talk about you're going to have to play against the best, and that's the way you're going to better quickly.

The guard play annually is tremendous. Like you said, it's dynamic, right? We send a lot of kids to the draft who are guard play, and there's space because the other guards on their team can also do a lot of good things, so they're operating in space.

We have really good guards too. Yeah, I think the guards, whether they're overlooked or not, I think these are guards that are having successful pro careers because of the strength of our conference annually and how that brings out the best in the group as a whole.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time today.

Welcome to our student-athletes joining us, Lanie Grant and Indya Nivar. We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Indya, all year you've been the primary defender on some of the best guards in the country. What's important tomorrow in defending Azzi Fudd and just the team defense and trying to contain them?

INDYA NIVAR: She's a great player. As I said before, I think when I play defense, it's more of an all-around team effort. It's not just me. All of us have to focus in on the scout and pay attention to the little details and making sure that we're there to help each other out.

But, yeah, it's going to be a good effort to kind of make things hard for her, but it's going to be a team effort the whole game.

Q. For either of you, you faced UConn early in the season last year. I know it's a little bit of a different team. You guys are a different team, but are there any qualities that really stuck out from facing them in that game that you feel like can translate to facing them in a setting like this or just stuff that you feel like you learned from that experience that will help tomorrow?

LANIE GRANT: Whenever you have an opportunity to play UConn, it's special. I think one of the biggest things I remember is aside from, like, being able to play Paige before she was drafted, but like the entire experience of how much fans they pull.

We were playing in North Carolina and there were so many UConn fans and there were so many little girls that just looked so happy to be able to watch them.

So the environment is going to be so fun and just to see the impact that the women's game and that they've had on the women's game is going to be special.

But everyone is talented on that roster, so it's just going to be, like Indya, said a full-team effort to just contain everybody that we need to contain.

INDYA NIVAR: I agree with Lanie that the environment they bring is crazy. It's very fun to play in. I think just the competitive aspect just staying focused for 40 minutes, I feel like that's what we learned. Last year I feel like we didn't play a complete game, so I feel like we can give our best effort and play 40 minutes tomorrow.

Q. Indya, you've been here in your third year in the program. Getting to this point and getting North Carolina back to the Sweet 16, what does it mean? Where do you think this program has come since



you've been here?

INDYA NIVAR: It means a lot. When you come into college you want to accomplish a lot of things, and we had a lot of milestones every year that we wanted to accomplish. Each year we keep growing and taking that extra step.

Yeah, it just means a lot. We don't do it by ourselves. We have our coaches. We have the support from the fans, which has been growing each and every year. They fill up Carmichael, and that has been very helpful throughout the year through our ups and downs. Yeah, it means a lot.

You know, we want to keep growing it.

Q. Lanie, you came early. You wanted to get here pretty quick. Talk about the way you guys share the ball, you share this coin? It's not like one player just takes over. Talk about how that's helped you guys.

LANIE GRANT: I think it's a testament to our coaching staff's recruitment and the people that they've been able to get to North Carolina. Like you said, there's not one player. Like on any given night it could be anybody that's going for any number of points, which is special and it's hard to defend.

We've got a lot of great shooters on the court and we've got people that can drive to the rim. We have great senior leaders. It's a testament to what Courtney and the entire coaching staff has been able to bring to North Carolina.

Q. For both of you, how do you process seeing that you're more than a 20-point underdog? How does facing the other three No. 1 seeds before kind of prepared you for this kind of challenge?

LANIE GRANT: You know, this team the entire season has done a really good job of focusing on what we need to focus on. Obviously we know it's going to be a great challenge, but at the end of the day, they put their jerseys on the same way we do.

We're going to go out and compete hard, and we're going to stick to our scout. None of us would be here if we didn't believe that it could be done. We're excited for the opportunity, and it's not lost on us how special it is.

INDYA NIVAR: Yeah, I feel like Coach Banghart did a great job of getting us to play the other top seeds. I feel like that kind of showed us how competitive these games -- like the competitive effort these games require for 40 minutes.

But, yeah, it's just basketball at the end of the day. As Lanie said, we both put on our jerseys. We as a team have committed to just focusing on us, what we can do to win each game. Yeah, I feel very confident in the belief that we have tomorrow.

Q. Indya, there's been talk and Lanie talked I think after the NC State game about the players coming together after that Notre Dame loss and saying something needs to change here and coming up with "it's us" motto, and really a lot of it was it's us, but it's also our seniors. I think Lanie specifically said that. What are your memories of that time and those meetings and how that message has helped the team?

INDYA NIVAR: Yeah, you know, you start off the season on a high note, but then there is ups and downs. It's really about how you respond in those adverse moments. We chose to come together as a team so that we can be most successful.

I remember after the Notre Dame game, we just all came together and just talked about our feelings, because as a team, you can kind of forget to acknowledge everyone's feelings and emotions. It was just important for us to all get that out there and then get on the same page about how we are going to move forward.

Since that moment, it's just been about staying connected off and on the court and just putting in the work. Even though we put in work all the time, I feel like this time it was more intentional and staying connected.

But, yeah, the "it's us" motto has been a big thing, because you know, the outside noise, the media when we focused on ourselves and focused on making -- getting better each and every day, I feel like that's been the biggest improvement for us.

Q. Lanie, if you wanted to add your memories of that.

LANIE GRANT: Yeah, I think you mentioned it. I know Indya wouldn't speak on it, but our seniors are so special. Indya and Harris have made such big impacts this year. Obviously Indya has been here for three years now, and every single year she's gotten so much better and she's made this program so much better.

We knew that after the Notre Dame loss we had a decision to make, like, as a unit and as a team. I never really doubted that we wouldn't work our way out of whatever we had gotten into, but like she said, we all just kind of came together. A lot of us really wanted to do it for the seniors, because they mean so much to us. Like not only are they our leaders, but they're our closest friends. We wanted

them to have the season that they deserved, so yeah.

Q. Can you both talk about the challenge that the UConn defense presents? I mean, they're up in your face and a very aggressive style.

LANIE GRANT: UConn is an elite defensive team. They do a really good job about making teams do things that they don't want to do and making them feel uncomfortable. You know, we're prepared for the ball pressure. We're prepared for the fact that they're going to be in passing lanes, but we also understand that it's not going to be a perfect game.

When we do make mistakes, it's not the end of the world. You just have to keep staying steady throughout 40 minutes. But that has been a big emphasis in practice on being prepared for it, not letting it kind of catch us off guard, especially in the first quarter.

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