

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

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Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Niele Ivey

Hannah Hidalgo

Cassandre Prosper

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Notre Dame 67, Vanderbilt 64

THE MODERATOR: Welcome the Notre Dame Fighting Irish press conference. Joining us today we have head coach Niele Ivey and student-athletes Hannah Hidalgo and Cassandre Prosper. Coach, we'll start with your opening statement.

NIELE IVEY: Well, I'm so excited to be here. Obviously everybody knows it's been five straight and I haven't had a chance to get over that hump, but we did because of these two, my starters.

Yeah, I'm so elated that I get a chance to experience this with this team. I've said this a lot, this is a special group. We have connected. We have a bond. These two believed in my vision. These two and KK. Like I said, a year ago they sat in my office and told me that they believed in us and believed in this program, and look at where we are.

All glory to God, number one. Without him, this is not possible. This is nothing but God. This is an incredible experience and moment, and I'm so grateful that I get a chance to share it with this group.

First time in Elite Eight as a head coach. I am beyond grateful and blessed.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. It's been a long year. You've seen this program



change. Roster wholesale change basically. You've seen Coach Ivey go through a lot. What does this mean to be able to get over this hump? Hannah, I saw you embrace Skylar too over there. What was that like to share that moment with her as well?

HANNAH HIDALGO: I think first and foremost to get over the hump with these group of women is so special. It means so much. I spoke earlier about how I used to take just being in the Sweet 16 for granted and how I embrace it so much more now and I'm so much more grateful to be here.

Then to finally get over the hump, especially when nobody thought we would even make it to the Sweet 16 or get past the second round, and like Coach Ivey said, first and foremost, I want to give all glory to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. When the Lord opens doors no, man can shut it, and we know that.

Now to be in this position where we're still dancing, it's honestly a blessing. Then to embrace Skylar, players like that, they built it up. Jackie was over there too. They made the foundation. We're just able to kind of live, play through them from what they've built. So it's great to have the alum come back and watch us and watch us succeed.

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I mean, I'm so proud of our team. You know, it's an honor to wear Notre Dame and to be able to play for such a great program, and to see how much growth we've had this past year just makes this so much sweeter.

I'm just really proud. I mean, especially, you know, for Hannah and I and KK just being back in this position and being able to do it again and get over that hump with Notre Dame, I think that just means a lot. Especially doing it for Coach Ivey who has been with us this whole time.

Q. Cass, kind of a double-sided, what was going through your mind when you get the ball off that inbound, and for lack of a better term, the game is up to you and you hit that layup, biggest shot of your career. Then at the end of the game you and Niele had a very long, I'm sure, emotional hug. The second part



of that question is just how would you describe your four years in this program and for it to pay off this way?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: That's a long question (smiling). I think, you know, this game when it came to the free-throws and that layup, the free-throws I was, like, I trust and believe in myself to be able to make those for my teammates.

Then that layup, credit to Hannah for trusting me with the ball at the last second and allowing me to make that layup.

Then, oh, my gosh, I think me and Coach Ivey, we were talking about just how much -- for me it was like we deserve this, and I'm just so grateful to be here and to experience this with these amazing women next to me. I think my four years at Notre Dame -- a word that I could describe it would be just growth, but I think the best word would be gratitude.

I'm just so grateful to the people that I've met, the connections I've made, and just the person that I've become through this program.

Q. This is for both players. Cassie, you said that you felt like you guys deserved this. In the fourth quarter it seemed like the game was up for grabs and someone was going to earn it. What was it about you guys that you were the ones that were able to make the plays to go out there and earn it?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: I think, you know, we've been in this position a couple of times this year. We know how big it is to be in the Sweet 16. I remember the time, I was like, I want this, guys. I want it.

And so to get to that point, it's really about just I think who wants it more and trusting that we can get there, yeah.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I feel like just like Cassandre said, it was like we didn't do all this work just for it to be over right now. I was telling the girls, I'm, like, this is not our last game playing together. We're going to figure it out and win this game so we can be able to play a game together again.

So just going out, I think everybody was so locked in. Not even when the game started, but days before we were so locked into the scout, and we were prepared.

Of course, like we said, we're not going to shut down Mikayla Blakes completely, but just trying to slow her down, and I think we did a really solid job of doing that.

Q. Hannah, the first part of the question is, do you know that you broke the single season record for steals?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Today?

NIELE IVEY: You broke the record.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Today?

NIELE IVEY: Yes.

Q. You broke in the first quarter. Well, that answers the first question. Then the second question is, are you able to feel when you're making the person you're defending uncomfortable? Can you feel that they're uncomfortable by your presence?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Absolutely. I think -- I always said it, I'm a point guard, so I know how difficult it is to run a team and set the plays while also being pressured. So once I got them to turn the ball over the first time, I was, like, okay, I can get in their head and keep pressuring them and continue to make them turn the ball over.

So that's what I did. I wanted to come out, and I told the team they're going to bring defensive intensity. I came out and tried to be a pest on the ball as I always try and do.

Q. Cass, when Hannah is bringing that much defensive energy, I mean, how much does it feed what you guys are able to do offensively? How does it help kind of set the tone for your team?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: My goodness. I think everybody knows, but we just feed off of her. I mean, her defensive intensity, it just fires us to do the same thing. You don't want to be on a team where one player is bringing all that effort and energy and then you're not responding the same way.

So knowing also basketball is a team sport. Everybody got to be on the same wave length, energy to bring that win. For us it's just having Hannah just bring that fire. We want to do the same thing for her and for the whole team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. We'll open it up to questions for Coach Ivey.

Q. Coach, you've had some really good teams during your tenure here. Why was this one the one to break through to the Elite Eight?

NIELE IVEY: It's a special group. You know, this group is really, really unselfish. They play really well together.

They've grown. They've bonded, and I just feel like, again, this group, they love to defend. I think that's the difference. I know defense is what's helped us get to this point, and this group, they're tenacious defensively one through five. Everybody is on the court. Everybody loves to play defense. I think that's the biggest difference.

Also, just we've grown really tight. Again, just having a new group and having that connection that I have with that core, KK, Cass, and Hannah, they've done a phenomenal job of building relationships with this new team that we have, really pouring into doing things outside of what I do.

They were very intentional this summer to really connect and show our new players the Notre Dame plan, the Notre Dame way, our standard. They're just special.

They love to work even through our adversity. They come back in the same mindset. They can let things go. They can turn the page. Again, we have an unselfish group that loves each other. That's why we're blossoming and having so much favor, because of the way that they love each other and that they play for me, and I'm really grateful of the connection that I have with this group.

Q. That intentionality, Hannah had talked about it the other day and how she spoke with Maya Moore at the Final Four and learned kind of that leadership aspect.

NIELE IVEY: Right.

Q. How did you see that come through, especially in the later stages of this very close game?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, it's been big. Hannah, she's really grown and really matured in her leadership, her trust. You know, just having poise. A lot of those things that she had to learn by being in the fire her freshman year and sophomore year, and even this year.

It took her kind of a little bit later for her to really kind of gain that trust, build that trust with her team and knowing that she realizes that she has to be a leader for this group. So even in the game, being poised, trusting -- she trusts her teammates. Even making that pass to Cass for her to make that big bucket, she really trusts her teammate.

That's something that she's really grown as far as her maturity. Her leadership is the reason why we're in this position.

Q. Same deal with Cass. You guys had that hug after the game. Very meaningful. You've talked a lot about her growth throughout the year. To see someone like Cass who has gone through it with this team, all the

ups and downs and grown in her senior year, to see her get that moment at the end of the game, what is that like as a coach?

NIELE IVEY: Oh, I'm so happy. I'm so proud of her. Like she said, she's been through a lot as far as injuries. She's playing a completely different position this year, and she's thriving in this position.

Cass and I are really, really close in the recruiting process. It's my first Canadian that I have recruited. Honestly it was difficult getting her, because she just -- it was just really hard process of getting opportunity to recruit her.

For her to believe in my vision, I'll never forget on a Zoom call when she said yes. She said, Coach, I want to be part of your legacy. Those words, they really touched my heart, because I've never heard a player say that. I'll never forget that.

Again, we built that trust and built that connection. For this year she stayed back and stayed and made a commitment to be with Notre Dame this summer instead of doing Canada basketball. It's paid off. She's most improved.

But it's also the leadership and just being connected to this program. Every recruit we brought in, she was the main one that was meeting us for are lunch, after every photo shoot, at every dinner. That tells you her commitment to this program.

She knows that I love her so much, but it's because of what she's done for me, and it's rewarding to feel -- to receive that back and forth from each other.

Q. I was there at the beginning of this year when you guys played Georgia Tech, and that was a loss there at Georgia Tech. I've seen the ups and the downs in the season. The only reason I bring it up is because you experienced so much from then until now.

NIELE IVEY: Yes.

Q. Can you talk about your emotions throughout the season from that moment specifically because it felt like a turning point into figuring out who Notre Dame perhaps wanted to be and arrive at this moment?

NIELE IVEY: Absolutely. That was a tough month. January was tough, so that was our first -- our second ACC -- that was our opener after Christmas. You know, we really missed KK, to be honest, and we felt that the entire month of January. There were games where my starters are playing 40 minutes, and it was really, really tough.

On the road at Georgia Tech, at Duke, it was really tough. Again, that's why I love this group so much because, regardless, they came back the next day. Their faith never wavered. They came in and gave me their all, and we just weathered the storm. It's just a special group.

Yeah, we've come a long way. I know I always talk about this, but just even having one more player to stretch my roster to seven makes a big, big difference. Also, even with adversity, we learned a lot. It's a lot of experience. Our back was against the wall. We had to learn how to fight through things, and it's paying off now.

Q. Along those same lines, you've spoken about how the intensity of this team has grown over time. What is it going to take to go to the next step? What do you need to take it up a notch on Sunday?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, we're just going to celebrate today first. For about 24 hours. Then when we figure out who we're going to play, then we'll focus on what we need to do from a scouting standpoint. So we're really going to enjoy this, but to get to the Final Four is really, really hard. You have to be great defensively.

It's a level of toughness that you have to have. The stage is even bigger than it was today. You have to have a great game plan and be really tough. I think that's the biggest thing. Again, we're going to celebrate and figure out what that match-up is going to look like.

Q. I'm curious, you look back a year ago; you had Hannah, Cassandre, and KK. You talk about how close you already were with them. Can a summer like that when those three tell you, I'm committed, when everyone else is leaving, they're committed to you and they're helping you build this roster, can a summer like that even bring you even closer? Off that, I'm curious what you learned about yourself in those moments, in those times where you were rebuilding this roster and trying to get to this point.

NIELE IVEY: I'd like to say I knew we had -- I graduated. I had three going to the draft. I know that that's been said a lot, but we had four transfers, but we had three that -- I had five that graduated, so I knew that we were going to have -- it was going to be a change as far as rebuilding.

So I was very aware of that, but yeah, I mean, I think we have a really close relationship. Hannah, we connect all the time. Hannah sat in my office and she said, my feet are planted. She wants to help continue to grow this program. When you have that transparency and you have that determination and passion for a program and a program that she wants to help continue to succeed, that's

the reason why we're so close.

Yeah, I'm grateful. I think every moment grows you as a person, and I had a lot of growth. Honestly it was the change of the landscape of college athletics. It wasn't just Notre Dame. It was 59 other schools that were in the same position.

So you have to weather whatever that storm is that comes your way, and I trusted and had faith. My trust was in the Lord, and I knew that -- I mean, I love this program. I pour into these kids. It means more to me because I went here. I walked in their shoes. So I want them to experience what I experienced, and I experienced a national championship twice.

So that's the reason why I give back to this program. I have great -- I have a great athletic director. I have a lot of love and support, people that pour into me, and my goal is just to pour back into them.

Q. The game got kind of tight there at the end, back and forth in the fourth quarter. What was your message to the team during those time-outs to just kind of study the team and obviously get that win today?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, I talked about just having poise. They went on their runs, but we had to make sure that we were being solid executing, but we had to get stops. We had a couple lapses defensively. Let Galvan get off a couple of times with her three. We were too low contesting blocks. She got to the free-throw line 13 times. We had to lock in defensively.

Then we started doing a better job of denying her, and then got some consecutive stops down the stretch. Then again, we executed as well.

I talked about it being our defense. I talked about getting a kill, which is three stops in a row, so getting consecutive stops and just making sure that they still had that poise and composure, because you can't get too high or too low in that moment.

I feel like they were very calm and very confident in that moment, which is a lot of growth, but I think that's just from the tough schedule that we played this season.

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