

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Final - Notre Dame vs UConn

Saturday, March 28, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

**Notre Dame Fighting Irish**  
**Coach Niele Ivey**

**Hannah Hidalgo**

**Cassandre Prosper**

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to today's Fort Worth press conference featuring Niele Ivey.

**Q. You talked a lot about that core of Hannah, KK, and Cass, but I'm curious about the four grad transfers that you brought in. You know, Vanessa, Malaya, Gisela, and Iyana. What made them not just players that you thought could contribute, each of them individually, but also players that you kind of thought would fit in with that core that you were building around?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I was definitely looking for fit. Obviously looking for positions to fulfill, looking for another ball handler. Vanessa, fulfilled that spot as far as somebody that could run the point but also could score.

Looking for floor space, a shooter, Iyana filled that position.

Gisela and Malaya, Gisela, more versatility, and Malaya, more size on the block. And also Kelly Ratigan, you know, somebody from home.

I feel like they all check the boxes for me as far as building -- or enhancing our culture. I thought that they were the perfect fit for Notre Dame. Some coming from high academic institutions.

I know everybody is aware that it's difficult, the portal, for Notre Dame, because we have a lot of academic requirements, so there are a lot of -- there are a lot of players in the portal that we just can't recruit because credits transferring over, all those things.

So there's a lot of stipulations that go into recruiting in the



portal. All of them were grads, so that lets you know they already graduated, so I didn't have any issues with that.

There's a lot of other things that came into factor, but as far as personality-wise, character-wise, they were perfect. We did our research. Everybody that we talked to that was related to them or AAU coaches or whatever they were, they all spoke really highly of all four of them.

They've been amazing. They've stepped on to campus, very business-oriented. They really adapted to our culture. They're relentless. They work hard, but they're great students. They're all doing really well in the classroom.

They were the perfect fits on and off the court, and they're just really family-oriented, so they aligned with everything that really makes Notre Dame special.

**Q. Niele, we know what happened last time you played UConn, and there's been a lot of talk about a 29 1/2 point spread for this game. I will just ask you why will this game be more competitive than that one?**

NIELE IVEY: Again, I know we keep saying this, but we didn't have KK. First of all, UConn is an amazing team. They are incredible. Playing them the first time around, I was, like, this is the best team in the country, hands down.

Having KK with us, having another versatile guard, somebody that has played against UConn in the past, that's really going to help us.

But again, it's a different time. We're playing better basketball. We're playing smarter. We're playing tougher. So we're different. We're more confident. This is the biggest stage you can be on.

This group has never been on this stage as far as being in the Elite Eight, so you have to have that sense of urgency. It's a mindset. You have to have that toughness.

We're going to come out and fight. You know, we have nothing to lose. We have no pressure on us. We're not just excited to be here. We're going to fight tomorrow.



**Q. You've been involved in the long history of Notre Dame, UConn, and you have been in every NCAA game as a player or a coach playing in them. Do you find it hard to believe it's the first time you guys have played for a spot in the Final Four and not in the Final Four?**

NIELE IVEY: That's kind of crazy, yeah. I've been blessed to be a part of this rivalry and been a part of going against one of the best programs in the history of the game, so I've learned a lot. Yeah, this is kind of crazy it's the first time around to get to the Final Four.

Regardless of the road, you know, we're excited to play, and I'm excited to, again, go against the best team in the country.

**Q. Do you have a specific memory of any of those games, either your year as a player or as a coach?**

NIELE IVEY: A lot of great memories. The biggest one for me is as a player winning in my hometown of St. Louis. That obviously meant -- it was our first championship, but it was also ten minutes away from where I grew up. My whole family was there. It was a special moment, and this was my last game, my fifth year. So to go out with a championship was really, really special.

Obviously that was in the semifinal round, but that Final Four, playing UConn to get to the championship game, was probably my most memorable experience.

**Q. On that same note, what do you tell your players about facing UConn in March? Obviously you've done that as a coach and a player. How is it different than a regular season game for these players that only faced them a couple of times in the past few years?**

NIELE IVEY: Well, Cass, KK, and Hannah have faced them multiple times, so they're prepared. They're ready, especially Hannah. She knows what it takes.

The first time around I think Vanessa was the only one that had ever played UConn. They experienced what that felt like in Storrs. It's a different type of game. It's a different type of mindset. They can crush from you the beginning, so you have to have confidence for 40 minutes. You can't come into the game not having confidence, because they'll take it away right from the beginning.

Again, it's a mindset. It's a mentality that you have to have. You have to have strength and courage and confidence going into that type of match-up. Now they have that under their belt. Iyana, Malaya, Gisela, now we know what we tried to explain, what you show on film. It's hard to simulate until you're actually in that moment.

Everybody has that under their belt now. There's no surprise in what we're going to see tomorrow. It has to be 40 minutes of a lot of toughness and a lot of fight.

**Q. You touched on the portal earlier. It's obviously impacted a lot of women's basketball programs, but why do you stick around and why did you come back to Notre Dame?**

NIELE IVEY: This university means everything to me, and it changed my life. I came in '96 as a young girl from St. Louis, from the inner city in St. Louis. I never experienced anything outside of St. Louis.

So when I got to South Bend I was just blown away academically, having the best of both worlds. I established a family away from home. I'm the only girl. I have four older brothers. Six hours away from home.

Like I said, I had never been out of St. Louis, so getting to Notre Dame, being a part of that family and that network and actually recognizing what that means is the reason why I came back as obviously an assistant coach -- you know, coaching with Coach McGraw and then having this opportunity to be the head coach.

This program has done so much for me. We always talk about at Notre Dame it's four for forever, and that's exactly what's happening to me. This is a university that takes care of you once you become part of that network. I had a chance to raise my son in the Notre Dame community. I've grown up in the Notre Dame community.

I have got a chance to build incredible relationships and my career has been here. I've had that opportunity to be a professional not just winning, getting a degree, but also being a professional through that Notre Dame brand. It's something that has served me really well, and I'm really grateful. That's the reason why I'm here.

And I get a chance to do this with this team, you know, and I get a chance to experience this with this team and give back to the university and the program that gave so much to me.

**Q. Yesterday you talked about surpassing expectations. I just wanted to kind of dive into that a little bit. What were the expectations, I guess, that maybe you heard or that you read for this team? Then how has your team handled hearing all that chatter around expectations?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I don't think we had -- I don't think anybody had expectations for us this season, so I'm the

type of coach that I have a bubble. I have a circle, circle of network, and I stay within that bubble.

We talked about in the beginning of the year, no one is going to expect anything out of us. We have to expect it out of ourselves. That's what we talked about, and we kind of quiet the noise, got to work, built the relationships, and I just focused on trying to get better. That's all you can do.

You know, every part of the season my focus was, you know, to bring this group in, mesh, build chemistry, and get better. We knew our schedule. We knew it was going to be really tough, knew the ACC was going to be really tough.

It was mostly about growing and building and getting better than we started, you know, building and gaining confidence and started what we did in February.

**Q. You talked about the importance of getting Vanessa out of the portal because you needed a ball handler. Two-part question. I'm curious, when you have -- over the years how have you found maybe the right balance, the right mix of Hannah off the ball versus Hannah on the ball? And why was Vanessa an important part of this group so you could have Hannah off the ball at times like her?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I definitely felt like I needed another ball handler, somebody that was a three-level scorer, somebody that I thought had poise, and I feel like watching her, she plays with -- she always had a great work ethic. I always felt like she was a fighter.

Again, talking, doing my research, finding out who she was as a person. I thought she was going to be perfect for us. Then talking to her on the phone, we just aligned with the things that she wanted. She obviously wanted a bigger role, and I felt like she could make immediate impact for us in our program.

Again, I just love the way she played. She's very business-oriented. She plays the right way. I thought she would be perfect for us. The balance of -- I had to push her to a different position. She wasn't really a point guard, but I told her coming in here, you might be running the point. You are going to be off the ball as well.

I always like to have a balance because Hannah gets so many tough defenders on her. Everyone schemes against her. Sometimes I like to relieve the pressure for Hannah so she can be off the ball and just be a scorer for us instead of having to facilitate.

V was locked in. She was, like, Coach, I'll do whatever,

whatever it takes to help us. That's the reason why I thought she was the perfect fit for us.

**Q. Having gone against UConn as a player, having to scout against them, play against them over the years, what's made them such a tough team on the defensive end? When you think about the match-up tomorrow, what are the sorts of things for your offense that you guys are going to have to be really sharp on going up against a really tough defensive unit?**

NIELE IVEY: First, Geno is one of the best coaches in the country. He's created a standard of excellence at UConn. When you are part of that program, that's how you operate. That's number one.

I think number two is they're very deep this year, so they have a lot of depth. I know in the past they were rattled with injuries here and there, but this year they're extremely deep. They have size.

Sarah Strong is another great player. You have great players all the way around, all five. Then you have six, seven, eight, nine that can come in and start on anybody else's team.

When you have so much depth, you have athleticism, you have great shooting, and it's the way that they play. They're very relentless in the way that they play. Again, it's the standard that they have.

For us you got to match the intensity. You have to have a level of toughness. You have to, you know, handle their pressure. I think that's the biggest thing. The margin of error is very small playing against UConn. And it's a mindset. You can't come into the game -- they can take you out of the game from the very beginning with the way that they play.

I have the experience, like you said, in all three levels. I try to reiterate that with the team. Sometimes you can't simulate. You have to be in the fire to understand what that feels like. But you have to be -- you have to play 40 minutes of great basketball, and you have to be tough.

**Q. I'm curious what you think about how the ACC prepared you guys to get to this point. They were the power conference that had the fewest number of teams in the top 16, and I think throughout the season; maybe didn't have as much representation throughout, whether that's the media or the committee or whatever. Virginia, you guys, Duke, Louisville. I guess tell us what did all of us get wrong? What did you see throughout the year that just helped you?**

NIELE IVEY: Being a part of the ACC for a while, this is a really tough league, so I'm happy that we have -- I'm really proud of the ACC. I'm proud of our representation. It's a tough league.

We are battling and fighting day in and day out. You know, when you see upsets, it's just because this league is really tough. There's a lot of parity in the league now. You know, a lot of great coaches.

We've had obviously a lot of great players that are playing within the ACC. So I'm just happy right now we're making a statement for the ACC. Virginia, Amaka is doing an amazing job of being in the play-in game and now being in the Sweet 16 for the first time for her. North Carolina last night, Louisville, Duke, you know, Kara getting to the Elite Eight two times in a row.

I think it's just showing everybody that our league is tough and the representation is really important, and I'm excited for us.

**Q. Hannah struggled against UConn last time. Have you sat down and talked to her about it, or do you know -- you know obviously what she did last night. She has the ability to do amazing things. What have you talked to her about in terms of flushing the last game and going out there and competing this time?**

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, Hannah is a competitor, so she recognizes where she needs to get better at as far as that last game. A couple of games ago her freshman year playing at UConn she led us in scoring 31 points. We beat them by 15.

Hannah is not thinking about that last game. Like I said, she's a dog. She's a competitor. She will be ready. She'll be ready tomorrow.

Yeah, she learns everything. She knows how to flush it. She knows how to get to the next game, next page. So for me, I'm just pumping her up. I'm just making sure that she knows who she is, and she knows who she is. She'll be ready tomorrow. The stage is meant for her, so she'll be ready.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time today, Coach. Good luck tomorrow. The student-athletes joining us are Hannah Hidalgo and Cassandra Prosper. We'll open it up for questions.

**Q. Hannah, can you just talk about what March means to you and why you just seem to kind of explode on the scene in March? How different is it for you going into this game from the first one that you had against**

**UConn earlier this year?**

HANNAH HIDALGO: March is when the stage gets bigger, the lights get brighter. It's win or go home. It's a lot of these players' the last time putting on a jersey ever playing basketball, so it means a lot more than, of course, the regular season.

We know we're guaranteed another game, so it's really just going out and giving everything you have. Every time I step on the floor, it's just doing a little bit more in order to take us to the next step.

Then as for UConn, of course, we played them earlier in the season back in December, and I would say it's a little different now. We're a completely different team. We're playing a lot better together. We're trusting each other more, and we look more complete.

We know tomorrow the margin of error is very small. We have to make sure we're doing all the little things, and everybody has to bring a little bit more in order for us to get over that hump.

**Q. For both of you, ACC got nine teams into the tournament. Five in the Sweet 16, two in the Elite Eight now, two playing today. I'm curious just what playing in that conference helped you guys with and what maybe you guys see in the ACC that maybe others outside don't see every day playing in that conference?**

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I think in the ACC we are playing against a lot of great competition. I think a lot of the teams are really well-balanced in terms of athleticism, physicality. I feel like the ACC is very defensive-based, so being used to playing against that sort of aggression on defense, feel like -- yeah, I feel like we're used to that. Now coming into the tournament I'm really glad that the ACC teams are doing great.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I say the ACC has so much talent all the way around. For us to have nine teams in and have the amount of teams we have in right now going into the Sweet 16, that's a big testament to how good the ACC really is.

To be able to play against that for months it really prepares us for March. When we're playing against different teams and they're throwing different schemes at us, it's nothing we haven't seen yet. Just playing in the ACC when everything is thrown at us, I think it's definitely prepared us for March and where we are now.

**Q. Hannah, talked about how you feel like you guys**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**are different than that earlier meeting with UConn. I don't know if you were watching yesterday's game or if you watched the January meeting, but where do you see the biggest difference in UConn between your last meeting and today?**

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I don't know. Somehow they get better just every game. But I think UConn, they're a great team. They play extremely well off of each other. Everybody plays within the system. They share the ball so well, and they're coached really well also.

You know, it will take a lot, of course, to beat UConn, but of course, the margin of error is very small, and it's doable. We're just going to trust in what we've been doing and trust in Christ, first and foremost.

**Q. Cassandre, looking between last year and this year, where do you feel like in terms of hand why's leadership or just the way that she's kind of carried herself this year, you're seeing maybe the biggest difference?**

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I think she's understanding her teammates a lot better. I feel like she has a good relationship with everyone on the team, and she wants to bring her teammates along.

Especially as a leader, as a captain, you know, coming into this year and just leading the team from the start, I feel like that was the biggest thing for us this year, especially knowing that we were going to have a completely different team, and she's really done a good job of that.

**Q. For either of you guys, having started your careers at Notre Dame, played UConn multiple times, so much history in this series. What does this rivalry mean to you guys, especially to get it on this stage?**

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, of course, it's going to be competitive and it's going to be a good game, and I think the rivalry started way before we even got here. So I think the alum know how much bigger it is compared to, you know, how we do. We'll realize after we're alum also.

We understand how big it is, and we have all our alum come back when we play them or when they have all their alum come back when we play them at their home floor. But it's always been a competitive game. It's always been tough, but I think it will be an exciting game.

You know, all our alum are watching and supporting us, so that definitely gives us courage too.

**Q. Hannah, has Coach talked to you about her**

**experiences against UConn? One of her biggest games ever got her to the national championship. They beat them in the semifinals, and she had a tremendous game. Has she tried to tell you guys these guys are beatable in this series?**

HANNAH HIDALGO: No, Coach Ivey doesn't talk about herself very much and her glory days; she was a great player.

But she's always told us about the rivalry. She'll always have alum come back and tell us how big the rivalry is or how hard it is to play at UConn and to focus and things like that.

She doesn't really focus on the past, but we know. We're focused on what we have right now and where our feet are right now and the pieces we have. She just does a good job of encouraging us and getting us prepared for that game.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports