

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

Sunday, March 29, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Notre Dame Fighting Irish

Coach Niele Ivey

Hannah Hidalgo

Vanessa de Jesus

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UConn 70, Notre Dame 52

THE MODERATOR: We have the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, it. We have head Coach Niele Ivey and student-athletes Hannah Hidalgo and Vanessa de Jesus. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach.

NIELE IVEY: Well, I'm just beyond proud of my team. What we've accomplished this season, the growth from the beginning of the season -- I talked about our first practice to where we are now -- is what you want for a coach. You want to see your team reach beyond their potential. You want to see them grow and develop off the court, on the court.

I've watched Hannah become one of the best leaders I've ever had. All of our grad transfers coming in enhancing our culture, enhancing our program. Cassandre being a most improved player in the ACC, which is a tough league.

Oh, my goodness, Leah, somebody that's coming back from injury. Every single person on our team. KK Bransford, what she's brought to us.

Our season shifted when she came back. To see their value, but also for them to know their value, that is the most rewarding thing for me is that this group left today -- they're leaving today more confident women. They're powerful, and they know it, and that's what I've always wanted.

I'm just so grateful. I'm so grateful and blessed that I get a chance to do what I love and in coaching this group. Obviously we wanted to win this game, but for them to



cement their legacy with me getting us back to the Elite Eight is something special, and I'll never forget it. This is one of my most special groups I've ever been around, and I'm so grateful. I love them so much.

Again, nothing but full gratitude and God putting us in this position.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Niele said it a little bit right there, Hannah. Just growth has felt like maybe this team's word of the season. For you, you obviously have grown your game on the court as a leader, but I'm curious, how do you feel like this season has helped you grow just as a person, because it feels like that's maybe what this program is most concerned with?

HANNAH HIDALGO: First and foremost before I even answer that question, I always want to give glory to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Through all the wins and losses he deserves all the glory.

I feel like just as a person this team has made me so much better. Taking the team kind of on my back and just learning each and every single one of our players, who they are as a person, who they are as a player. I was a lot more intentional with that.

You know, they've helped me grown my patience and just my understanding, just the way I think. I think they've helped me in so many different levels. All credit to my teammates. I'm so grateful for each and every single one of them.

I wouldn't want to go to war with anybody else in this world. You know, I'm so grateful for them.

Q. This is for in Vanessa. With everything that Coach just said, taking that in mind, what did it mean to be a part of that, and how fulfilled do you feel having chosen to be a part of it?

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, you know, I'm just super grateful for this group. Coming in I kind of just felt the bond



right when I met all of them over the summer, just hanging out, and then just working together every single day. I think this is a really special group.

We're going to be friends forever, and I can't wait to see what they do next year.

Q. It seemed like the first three quarters of that game -- you got going in the fourth -- but you were frustrating them on the offensive side of the ball. I'm curious just what you guys saw that was working. They were letting you guys play a little more physical, but what you thought was working for you guys defensively against them early on.

HANNAH HIDALGO: HANNAH HIDALGO: Just like you said, it was our physicality, and we've grown our defense so much. It was very shaky in the beginning of the season, so to see how much it's grown since then, we saw that, you know, the refs were allowing us to play a little bit more, so just being a little more aggressive with them and earning the baskets and the baskets they hit were tough baskets.

UConn is a great team, and we knew we weren't going to keep them scoreless, so it was really just a matter of making every single thing tough for them, and I think we did a great job of that. I don't think this game was about us not being physical, which it was when we first played them.

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, just to add on to what Hannah said, the physicality and the extra efforts. When they Crowe in, we made them earn it at the line. Nothing was easy for them. They're a great team. We knew they were going to make baskets, so just making it hard for them.

Q. Hannah, this isn't your first time being a veteran leader on a team. You were that in high school at Paul VI. What were you able to take from that to use here and how can you combine the experiences moving forward?

HANNAH HIDALGO: From my high school experience?

Q. Yeah.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I wouldn't say I was the best leader in high school. I had my ways of leading, and it worked for my team. My ways of leading for my team. It was a little more motivating them and trash talking and things like that. We really fed off of that in high school, so it's a little different, you know, as I've gotten older. It's not the same way of leading. So it took me a while to understand that. My teammates react a little differently to

certain things, and I have to figure out to connect with each and every single one of my teammates.

So it's definitely going to help me, especially with me being a senior next year just leading every single one of my teammates in however way is possible and however they want to be led and just doing that and pushing them to the best of my ability.

Q. Hannah, you guys were able to defensively push them sometimes to go to second, third, fourth options. I just wonder if you could -- you talked about the defense. It is so tough against them. The fact that you were able to sort of try to do that as much as possible during this game, do you take something away from that effort? They really did have to battle to get what they got.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, absolutely. We know that UConn, they're extremely well-coached. They're extremely fundamental. They do everything like they're supposed to. So I think it was so good for us to be able to take away their first, second, and third option.

Like I said, our physicality was really good. I think this game we did a great job of being very physical with them. Like we've been doing for the past couple of months. Just like when we played Vandy, we made it as physical as possible, made every shot tough.

Again, I just think that is a testament to how we've been playing together as a team.

Q. I had the chance to talk to KK yesterday, and she said to me that she was really thankful and grateful for the growth of Coach Niele over the last several years. I wanted to ask you what sort of growth have you seen from her this season that's impressed you, and also how has she inspired you even through kind of the ups and downs of the season?

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, this is my first year, so I can talk about how she has inspired me. When I first met Coach Ivey, we just connected on a personal level, and I knew that she would be a great person on the court and off the court. Just her leadership, her heart, and I'm just super grateful to have been here.

I think we've all grown together so far. I'm just really thank grateful for God for bringing me here. I think it was meant to be. I'm just super grateful to have been part of this journey with her.

HANNAH HIDALGO: I don't know what personal growth Coach Ivey has had, but she keeps telling us she's grown

so much as a person.

I can speak for on the court. She pushes us. You know, we had a completely different roster this year, so her ability to connect with each and every single one of the players, which was completely different from our first two years, is something that I know no other coach can do it like Coach Ivey can do it.

She's a player's coach, and I'll always say it. I'm so grateful for her and how she pushes us. She pushes us to the max every time. She's bringing the energy days that we don't feel like it, and it really motivates us to see how passionate she coaches.

Again, I always speak about it, but her ability to connect with us and how she loves us off the court makes it so much easier for us to play for her when we're on the court.

I trust Coach Ivey. If something is not working, you trust to go to her and say, hey, this is not working. She's there to take my advice and just listen to me. She trusts me. She gave me the keys the first day I stepped on to campus, and I'm so grateful for her.

Q. Hannah, you made a little history in this tournament. You went deeper than you've gone before, ran into a tough draw today, obviously. How do you think this sets you up for next year and where you would like to go?

HANNAH HIDALGO: (Microphone malfunction).

Q. Hannah, I'm curious, you know, you've gotten to play against UConn a couple of times. What is it about what they do defensively that's so tough? What kind of did you see in terms of coverage and stuff that they threw out at you?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Like I said, UConn is a great team. They do everything right, and I said it before, we have to have little to no mistakes in order to win the game. The margin of error is very small.

You know, they do a great job of rotating and helping when they takeaway the first option, and then rotate really well. It's really just a matter of, you know, kicking and hitting what's open and getting to the second or third option, because they do a great job of denying and being extremely physical.

We knew that coming in, playing against them before, but I think we handled it very well for most of the game.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time today, we'll

take questions for Coach.

Q. It's not often after a season-ending loss you see a coach kind of smiling with as much pride as you have been throughout this press conference. Again, you talked about how this team has helped you grow as a coach, person, and even as a mother. What is it about this group that gives you so much pride and has helped you grow so much on all aspects?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, the end of last year was very difficult, so when I came in and to have this roster and to assemble this group and to be able to work with them, they gave me a lot of joy. I love coaching with joy. I think I'm better when I'm coaching with joy, and that's what this group gave me.

The game of basketball is something that I love. This university is something that I love, so when you have those two combined but also a group that you love to work with, it makes it so much sweeter, so much better.

I'm smiling because, again, of course, we all want to win the game, but I'm just proud of this group. Like I mentioned earlier, they're more confident than they were in August. They're more confident than they were in November. So to see us reach beyond everyone else's expectations, but to prove ourselves right this season, to get better, to say get stronger, and just watching the growth, you know, especially I talk about Cass, KK, and Hannah a lot. They're my core. All of them have gotten better.

It's not easy having a brand new team and having to reintroduce the culture and teach it. I'm teaching lessons on Notre Dame women's basketball a lot.

For us to have that growth and to watch them connect and the way that they've played this season is the reason why I have so much pride. That's what you want as a coach. You want to see your team reach the highest potential that they could, and I feel like we did.

Then, you know, just to hear -- for me it's always rewarding to hear how they feel when you ask them questions. For me it's like I'm doing my job. I'm always talking about I want to love and serve this university and these student-athletes. When I'm hearing them, it makes me realize, like, I'm doing my job. I'm supposed to mentor, and I feel like they're all better because we were together this season.

I know the ones that are leaving, the ones that are graduating, the ones that are returning, they're going to be better in whatever field they're going in or coming back to us. That's what I want.

Q. Coach, Hannah said that the roster is going to be a lot different next year once again, but we're sitting here talking about how much there's so much to build off of what you guys just did, so how do you balance those two things of, yes, you want to channel everything that you've done, but also, you're going to have to do that with players who are new to the system once again?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, Leah Macy, she got a chance to watch this, so that's going to help. And to have a really grad freshman class that's coming in that wants to contribute, they're ready. They're hungry. They're all winners. They've all won at the highest level where they are right now, so I know they'll come in and make an immediate impact for us. I'm going to rely on them early no matter if they're freshmen or not.

Then having great leadership coming back, that's going to help mold them, teach them what to do early. I think that's the excitement that we have. Our future is really bright and I know that that class was hand-picked for me. God hand-picked that freshman class. I'm grateful for them, and I just think having that mesh of toughness, experience now, getting to this level, knowing what it takes, I know that our leaders are going to do a great job of getting them on board and helping them make that immediate impact right away with us.

Q. You guys did a really good job at kind of frustrating Azzi and Sarah early. Then they have Blanca and there are some other pieces. They're just so deep. I'm curious what type of, like, challenge that poses to a defense when you can really slow down two All-Americans, but then they have other people that pop in.

NIELE IVEY: That's the Catch-22. We wanted to contain Sarah and Azzi, make it a really tough night, but we had to make sure no one else was a factor, and it was. Blanca was a big factor having 20 points; 4 for 8 from the 3-point line.

She did a great job. Their supporting cast I felt like did a great job, but she was the X factor for them.

We, unfortunately, let her loose and she got going. I thought we were, again be, really physical, like you mentioned in the first half containing Sarah and Azzi. They still ended up with three in double figures.

But I thought we were physical. I have always talked about us having toughness, and I feel like we were tough. In, just like you said, it was a tough situation, apparently in the second half. We struggled to score, but I thought

physically we matched them a lot better than we did the first time around.

Q. You've gotten the chance to play UConn several times over the past couple of years. I'm curious when you think of this UConn team, what's kind of unique about this one, especially on the defensive side of the ball?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, they're very, very physical. They try to takeaway every option that you have. You have to handle their pressure. They're pressuring from -- the game is a minute and a half left, and they were still pressing. They're going to apply that pressure a lot all the time. They're very disciplined. They play well together, and they just play hard.

So that's the challenge you have with that team, and this team is deep. Last year's team was just very similar roster. Besides Paige, very deep.

You have players coming off the bench that can start anywhere else. When your starting five is that solid, but you also have a lot of bodies coming off the bench, it's difficult.

But I thought our team did a great job of matching up. Confidence-wise we were ready to play. We were physical. We knew what to expect, but again, just offensively we struggled in the second half, and that was the difference.

Q. Coach, Hannah talked about how tough their defense was. Can you talk about what Arnold and Heckel did against Hannah? They just seemed to one right after another come back in and go at her and make her work for everything she got.

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, and Hannah was -- we knew they were going to be really physical with her. Like you mentioned, having fresh bodies on her. They iced her. They hedged her. They did a lot of different things. They were very physical with her.

She's used to having all that type of pressure, but you know, I mean, it is what it is. Yeah, I thought they were very physical. I thought they did a good job of, again, mixing it up and showing a lot of different defenses. They switched one through five, so she had to read a lot, and she had a lot of bodies in the paint, a lot of people collapse.

Yeah, they tried to make every shot really tough for her.

Q. We've seen throughout her career and especially



this year many times Hannah can single-handedly change games.

NIELE IVEY: Yes.

Q. Take over games as sort of a one-woman wrecking crew. What do you think we can see from her going forward? There are so many things she does well now. What do you think is the next step, if you will?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, I think she's still going to continue to grow with her leadership. I think that was the biggest separator for her was her maturity. I think you're going to see her being even more poised, more composure. We're going to work on that this summer as far as continuing to build that trust with a brand new team.

But she knows what to do now. She's had a year under her belt of being that vocal leader for us and so has KK.

For Hannah she's had that year under her belt, so she knows what to say, she knows how to push her team. Like she mentioned, she learned how to connect and learn each and every person on and off the court. That was new for her.

Before she was -- she didn't get a chance to do that. I thought she learned how to connect with everybody, and that's just being young. I think just having that year under her belt, being more mature, you're going to see a more poised Hannah early on, and I think her leadership is going to continue to shine. Basketball-wise, she's going to take care of the things she needs to work on. We'll look at analytics, things we can help her with, develop-wise. I think the maturity is going to be so early on next year that that experience is really going to shine through for her next year.

Q. When y'all were down by quite a bit very late, Hannah was still diving on the ground for loose balls, playing incredibly hard. How important is that not just for her and everybody who is coming back, but those recruiting classes and spending it forward?

NIELE IVEY: I'll credit the entire team. They all fought. We said we got to trust each other, we got to believe, and we got to fight. They all did. KK is diving on the floor. V is diving on the floor, G; everybody did. It's contagious with Hannah doing it, but we said we're going to keep -- we're going to fight all the way until that buzzer sounds, and that's just the heart of this group.

They fought the entire time, but I think that's just, again, because they want to leave it all on the floor, and I feel like they did.

Q. Obviously you guys were better than the game you played them in January, but so were they. What do you see in UConn as they try to win another championship? Is this sort of -- are they better -- a lot better than they were in January? What do you see them doing in the Final Four?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, again, just having a deep roster. Again, I think just having that spark. Blanca is something that didn't happen the first time around. She had a great game, and I'm sure she's going to feed off that energy in the Final Four. Having everybody step up and being ready. I think they're just as solid. They're deep, and anybody can step up if others are not playing well.

I mean, their two best players still ended with double figures. There's a very physical, very confident team. They play well with each other. Very disciplined. You know, they're a really, really good team.

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