

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Montana State vs Ohio State

Friday, March 21, 2025

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

Montana State Bobcats Coach Tricia Binford Esmeralda Morales Natalie Picton

Media Conference

Ohio State - 71, Montana State - 51

TRICIA BINFORD: All the credit goes to Ohio State. They came out in that third quarter, really jumped on us super fast. It was like a blink of an eye.

Their pressure is great. They're super fast. I want to wish them the best. They had a great game.

Q. How do you put into words this atmosphere and playing on the road in this first round and the home-court advantage Ohio State had?

ESMERALDA MORALES: It was great. It felt like March Madness. It just felt great. I loved the energy, especially when they were booing us. That's what I love. It kind of just gets me going. But they have a great fan base here.

NATALIE PICTON: I'm going to go over Esme. I really do love when a team has a good fan base. I think it's fun. And even if they're cheering for the other team, it keeps us in the game too. We had a very good fan base here also. It was great.

Q. Natalie, to build off that, what got in to you in the second quarter? How does it feel to go to the free-throw line under the circumstances in which you did?

NATALIE PICTON: Well, I grew up watching basketball and everybody going into those tough games in March Madness. And I think it was just fun hearing them booing me as I was at that line.



I think it kind of motivated me to make those two baskets. It was just awesome. I loved it. I loved seeing them all like wave their hands all around. It was fun. That was a fun second quarter.

Q. What was so key to staying in the game and having a couple of those leads in the first quarter and the half?

ESMERALDA MORALES: Momentum, I think, and then scoring. When we scored the bucket and we had the momentum and the energy, you can kind of feel it.

But I think the biggest thing was we didn't really take care of the ball, including myself. I should have done better. But the momentum, you could just feel it.

And we had a great fan base. Like Nat was saying, it was great to have them here and travel to Columbus, Ohio.

But the biggest thing was just playing us and doing us. And you could see it in the first half.

NATALIE PICTON: The first half was fun. I think we just had fun and we were just playing like nobody was watching. It was great. And we just go off of each other. And I think once one person gets momentum, everybody gets momentum. It was a lot of fun.

Q. You got the most out of a year, I feel an athlete could have in one year with Montana State. And Bobcat Nation took you in as well. What do you appreciate most about this journey as your time wraps up at Montana State?

ESMERALDA MORALES: Just welcoming me. I felt like it was family here. Because when you're playing against a community like this you just don't get the sense of it. But being part of the family, it's like, wow, it's amazing.

I'm so blessed I was able to do this for one year and do what we did in a year, like you said. But the biggest thing is just like the community, how they were like, we're family and we're here for you.



Q. Obviously not the result you wanted, but incredible season. What do you want people to remember the most about this team and this season?

NATALIE PICTON: That we did it together. Our hashtag is "all for one," and I think we stuck to that. We cheer each other on. Like every other game, doesn't matter who is the leading scorer, it was all of us. And we just played as a team. I'm so glad that Esme came on our team to help us do that.

ESMERALDA MORALES: Nat said it perfectly. We did it. You could see it. It was anybody's game. It was like Nat against Idaho State, Marah in the big moment against Montana, K.J., Dylan. It takes everyone, and for us, no matter who's game it is, it's, like, let's go, Let's go and try to get this win together.

Q. Esme, did you feel any kind of different defense against you after you hit two early 3s? And just in general after they have made a shot, what sort of pressure did you and the whole offense feel when just trying to move the ball on the court?

ESMERALDA MORALES: A lot of body, a lot of hands. I got hit in the face many times. It's just a little bit shorter. But the biggest thing was their body. You could see it and sense it. They were being a little more aggressive when I was coming off screens, trapping. But the biggest thing was like their body.

Q. The physicality, the length, the speed they had, how would you describe it now that you've played against them?

NATALIE PICTON: Crazy. Like I said before, like watching them from the TV doesn't do any justice to playing on the court against them.

But it was a lot of fun. I wouldn't go -- I would go back and change it with the outcome. We just did it together and that's all we could have done.

ESMERALDA MORALES: Very athletic. You kind of get the sense of they're faster. One step, they can get out a little bit further. But the biggest thing, we're always like the shorter ones out there. It's, like, you can't really use it as an excuse. Just have to be smarter. A lot of ball fakes. Just read how they react to it.

Q. I know it's hard to look ahead now, but you guys are now coming off a 30-win season looking into next year. So what do you hope this team brings into next year and building off the season?

NATALIE PICTON: I think we bring in the same energy, especially with incoming freshmen. I think we bring them into our community and we treat them like we treated Esme like we treated our new freshmen here this season.

I think if we just do that and we stick to our "all for one," that would be great.

Yeah, we lose a couple of key players for us. I think a lot of us have gained knowledge and skills from Esme and from K.J. and Taylor. I couldn't have done it without my team. I think just going forward we'll keep doing the same thing, being a team.

Q. What's the biggest quality that the seniors are leaving you with?

NATALIE PICTON: Leadership. Esme for sure would be pace, her IQ. I'll never be like Esme, but I've learned from her. And she's the best leader I've ever played with. And I'll miss her a lot.

I think going into my junior year I'll get that leadership ability and I'll keep using my voice. That's what Esme has taught me a lot throughout this season.

Q. I remember back to the end of the Big Sky Conference a couple years ago, maybe ironically, the one that Esme shot you out of, and you say at the end of that game that endings are hard but journeys are amazing. I'm curious if you can --

TRICIA BINFORD: What a great quote.

Q. It really was. I'm curious what you're going to remember about this particular journey with all of them involved but maybe ironically with Esme involved too?

TRICIA BINFORD: I'm definitely going to remember how they were so selfless this entire season and they were all bought in. It took everybody to be all bought in.

We did talk about the hashtag. It's hard to live out a hashtag when it's in a grind, it's really difficult. This team at some point will go down as one of the greatest if not the greatest Bobcat teams of all times.

I know 30 wins, we were asking how long has the Big Sky been in existence to get 30 wins. And to do that, to play that consistently for that long of a season, just so proud of the way that we did our journey together this year. They had so much fun. They brought out the best in each other. A coach could not be prouder of that.

Q. What did you see of your team during the highs of

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

the first half and maybe someone would say the lows from Ohio State in that same period, and kind of the way that flips, because it's a huge run at the end of the second and into the third? What changed in that amount of time?

TRICIA BINFORD: They obviously jumped out on us so fast. I thought we were very consistent. I shouldn't say "very consistent." I thought we were more consistent with some of our transition defensive habits. And they jumped out on us immediately.

They got by us and had some really, really easy looks. And it happened too fast. I should have got the timeout after the six points instead of the nine points. I think at that point we got a little rattled.

And that's where it kind of blew open as far as really sticking with the process. It's hard to be in that situation until you are with that speed that they're going up against. And I felt like we were playing angles a little bit in the first half.

I just thought I couple more possessions we could have gotten more of our traps and really got a lot more confidence with it. But when they broke that open, it was just really difficult.

Q. What are you going to learn from this game moving forward to try and stay competitive later in games and potentially win a game when you get here?

TRICIA BINFORD: The number one thing that we're really searching for that fourth ring is not to play on somebody's home floor for your first-round game. And we had 30 wins. We thought we had a really strong resumé, a very competitive one.

I think we're going to have to probably get a win within the top 50 in the NET. I think that's something that we're going to really have to focus on.

But we had a very competitive preseason schedule. We had some in that 50 to 100. But it is difficult. That crowd gets on you. It's on somebody's home floor. At the same time, I'm really proud of how our kids handled that the first half, the way they got the crowd engaged when that kind of happened, I'm, like, this is Bobcat basketball.

They handled it really well in that first half. It just took a few minutes in the third quarter. If we could have that first few minutes back and just trust our composure and trust our process, I think this game's a little bit tighter.

We didn't have everybody playing their best game today.

But we certainly had some kids show out. And I think maybe I would like to see some WNBA coaches see a young lady for a potential kid in in the training camp because Esme really showed some incredible stuff today.

Q. Natalie's 10-point run off the bench and that great move she had, what stood out most to you with her performance in the second quarter?

TRICIA BINFORD: The big thing is we had to win between the ears. We talked about the jerseys, like, if we're focusing on the name on the other uniform we're not going to be us. We really needed to focus on the name on our uniform and who we are and why we're here.

And Nat comes in and she's relentless. We needed a couple other kids to be putting points on the board. You're at this level, you just don't have a lot of room for error against this caliber of opponent.

So we love that she came in. She was attack-minded. We had some foul trouble with Marah. I thought that hurt us in the second quarter. We survived that. Needed to get her going. Needed to get K.J. going. We didn't get K.J. going like we needed to today, with her experience.

But Nat gave us that spark. That was obviously really important. We needed more pieces. They had five kids in double digits. We did not. That was a piece of it. But really proud of how she came out.

Q. Natalie mentioned how free and fun they were playing early on. How much do you think just their mindset and their ability to play that way helped you guys build that lead early?

TRICIA BINFORD: They came in with a great mindset all week. We've been playing kind of with the bull's-eye on our back all year long. To come in as the underdog, that was something that we haven't been able to do all season.

I think that they came in with the right mentality, that trust of who we are and go out there and represent the Big Sky. And I felt like we did that in the first half. I just go back to those first couple minutes. They just came in with a great mentality, not here for just enjoying the moment but believing we could give a great game and do some things and be attack-minded ourselves. These are two very, very good defensive teams, and we had some moments where we were able to show that.

Q. Lexi warmed up before the game but does not get in. Did she get injured in some capacity between Boise and here?

TRICIA BINFORD: She did not. That was a coach's decision on just playing a tighter rotation.

Q. To follow up, you mentioned some foul trouble with Marah. Taylee gets a couple quick fouls also but everybody eventually stays in. Can you speak to what efforts you saw from them throughout this game as well?

TRICIA BINFORD: That's why these moments matter. You've got to get your underclassmen seasoned and locked in and trust that they're ready for these moments.

What I love about this young group is they've been just as part of this 30-win season as anybody else. Their impact has been tremendous. I can tell you right now a lot of kids are probably not happy with the way we played, but I'm really proud of the way we competed all year long, and this game included. So we're going to grow. We're going to learn and we're going to keep getting better and they've been in this moment now. So that's going to be something that's really good for us having that experience moving forward.

Q. What do you hope to take into next season with a 30-win season building off history this year with a great group coming back?

TRICIA BINFORD: I think we're going to have to focus on our -- like I said earlier, the preseason scheduling, I think that's really important. We're going to continue to do what we can on our side of things, making sure that we're all headed into that same direction.

I think the learning lesson here at this level when you get to this level when you get to this stage, you've got to be so consistent. We didn't have great moments today of consistency that we've been particularly on the defensive end because that does travel for you everywhere you go, but I think there's a lot to learn from this experience of just trusting who we are and what our principles are because there were moments today that I didn't think we trusted that enough.

Q. This is the lowest margin of victory that MC's had in the NCAA Tournament and a close first half. How much of it all do you kind of take that as a sign that you guys can maybe close the gap down the road and make this even closer and win one of these?

TRICIA BINFORD: I think right now everybody would tell you we feel like we're better than this end result here. I think we had a really tough third quarter that we weren't super proud of and we had to go into a zone we're preparing for just to slow the pace down and we had to go

away a little bit of who we are.

So I think we're better than that deficit, but at the same time it's a step in that direction and nobody can take the fact away they won a conference and won a conference tournament and have 30 wins. So that was really special.

Q. Any moments from this trip that really stand out, any memories that you're going to take with you for a while?

TRICIA BINFORD: I think the biggest memory was when the crowd really got very upset in the first half and our kids did that -- I thought our kids really were locked in and showed what we were capable of doing. We just need to put a full game together. That's probably the biggest thing. But this week has been really special. These kids are just unbelievable kids. Really proud of them.

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