

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Fairfield vs Notre Dame

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Schottenstein Center

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Coach Niele Ivey

Cassandre Prosper

Hannah Hidalgo

Media Conference

Q. In mid-February the team kind of started to hit its stride where over the next eight, nine games you were either winning or really coming close in that game against Duke in the tournament. What kind of changed the tide of the team heading into February there?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I think we had a lot of momentum. I feel like we started clicking as a team. Everybody -- we trusted each other more on the court, and over time it developed into us building that momentum, and now we're heading into the tournament with the same momentum and the same trust that we've been building this whole year.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I think we really just started clicking at the right time, and I think it was just that. We started to have confidence in ourselves and then one another, and then it really started to show on the floor.

I think this time is the most important time when we needed to start clicking, not so much in the beginning of the season and then falling apart at this point. So I'm glad we were able to kind of have that confidence in ourselves and in each other to where we were able to click right now.

Q. Obviously that Duke game, such a wild game, and it came down really to the final second. Having so much time from that game, what do you learn from that game to build for the NCAA Tournament this weekend?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I think that game was really kind of a testament to our toughness, I would say. I would say the first time we played Duke, we didn't have much toughness at all, and I don't think that was the case the last



time we played Duke. I think it gives us a lot of momentum going forward because Duke is a phenomenal team. They're very fundamentally sound. They're very well-coached. For it to be a one-possession game and not being able to hit a couple shots, being able to get a couple offensive rebounds, it gives us a lot of momentum knowing we can do a lot in this tournament.

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I agree. Whatever she said. I think the biggest part for us was recognizing that we've grown so much this year, and now we lost by two to Duke, but we could have won that game. Going into the tournament knowing that we are a great team and we're here to compete, and every game it's down to little mistaking, little shots that we can make. But we're going into the tournament knowing that we're a great team, and that's all that matters.

Q. When you lose so many pieces like you did from last year's team, you talk about kind of clicking now, clicking in February, now. How does that work, that journey through the season? You're trying to make everything work, and when you get it clicking, it looks like it's a good product on the floor.

CASSANDRE PROSPER: I think it started when we got new transfers. It was about laying a foundation in the summer. At the beginning of the year we knew that it wasn't going to be always smooth. We knew we were going to have ups and downs. But the trust that we built at the beginning of the season is now translating on the court right now.

For us as leaders, we're upperclassmen, we've been part of this team for a long time, so I think knowing what it takes to build a team that sustains all these challenges, so at the end of the year in March Madness, we're the best team that we can be right now.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Just to go off that, basketball is not just about kind of what we do on the floor. It's really about the connections that we build off the floor. I talked to actually Maya Moore last year at the Final Four and she was just talking about how her team, they were just so tight knit. Like on the bus they had no phones and they were



playing cards and it was just like a family. When you're playing with girls that's like a family, it makes you want to do things so much harder for them, makes you really want to run through a wall for them and it makes clicking on the court so much easier.

Just to go off Cassandre, what we were able to do in the summer which was going to each other's houses, going out to eat and doing all those things with all the new transfers, it made it so much easier, especially down the line, kind of knowing on the court, okay, this is what my teammate wants, this is how they respond to this, and we're able to kind of feed off each other.

Q. This is the first time since I believe 2022 you're not hosting a regional game. What differences, if any, do you guys see playing a neutral round game for the first time, and what differences do you see from this year's team to last year's team in hopes of making a long run this year?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I think of course the biggest difference for us is not having our fans. It's so different when we're able to have the Notre Dame people behind us and in the stands and they really come and they really support and it's so much easier to play when we're playing in front of them and for them.

But like we've been saying, regardless of where we're going to go play, it doesn't matter. We're going to go out and we're going to play the hardest every time we step out on the floor, regardless of where we're put, where we're seeded at, and we're really -- it doesn't matter kind of where we're at. We're just going to go out and kind of do our thing.

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I agree. I don't think it matters. I think this year we've faced a lot of adversity, and now being in a different environment, we just get to showcase how more resilient we are as a team.

Q. What are you seeing from the matchup with Fairfield?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: They are a very good shooting team. So for us, it's going to be locking down on our defense. I think our defense has gotten a lot better this year and over time. I feel like it's our superpower right now, so making sure that we're locked in on that point of things, and then offense is going to generate from that.

HANNAH HIDALGO: She kind of said it all, but they love to shoot threes. I think they're like No. 1 in attempts and makes. I think they make 12 threes a game. It's going to be really important not running to the paint in transition and

kind of fanning out and just picking up shooters because everybody shoots.

Q. On that last point from what you guys said about just trying to defend, use that as your superpower and defend the three-point line, how do you kind of make sure that you're taking away those threes but also not maybe overly committing to that to where you're leaving other areas open? How do you go about trying to do that?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I think it's really just a matter of being disciplined. But I think for us, the biggest thing, we know they're shooters, so we're going to run them off the line and then trust that our rotation is going to be there and that our help is going to be there and kind of play off that. I know we talk about trust, so that's kind of what we need to stick to is just trusting that our help is going to be there when we do run them off the floor.

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, she said it all.

Q. Cassandre, I'm curious your opinion on just what makes Hannah so special, and for you, Hannah, where you feel like you've grown the most, whether on or off the court this year?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Hannah, I've seen her grow these past three years, which feels like maybe four -- three. But she is just, I think, an amazing person. The way she is on the court, I think her energy, everyone can see it, but really she wants to give that energy to her teammates and then bring them along with her.

Off the court, I've seen her become an amazing person, an amazing woman, a great friend. I think her confidence is what really stands out for me. The fact that it's so consistent and very -- it's not cocky, it's just, she knows her abilities, and she's very confident in them.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, to kind of go off that, I think I was more intentional with being a leader this year, and I know me and Cassandre really talked about it a lot this summer on how we wanted to lead this team this year and kind of what we wanted to do and the difference that we wanted to make, especially this year with us being the leaders.

So being a lot more intentional with that. I wouldn't say for me it wasn't about how much better I've become skill-wise because my previous two years I did what I needed to do, but I just wanted to be a better person this year and build my character and figure out how to be a leader. I've been led before, and we've been able to figure out how we want to lead our team from now on, and we want it to be

player-led and kind of not allow our coaches to run everything if they don't need to and kind of handling things that we need to do. But just being more intentional with going out to eat with the girls or playing games or texting the girls and saying, you know, how is everything going. Just being a lot more intentional with that.

Then it really translated to on the floor, just making sure I'm bringing my team in for every single huddle, I'm talking to the girls when I need to.

But I would say it's not just me, it's a big testament to I would say Cassandre and definitely KK and they definitely helped me in those areas because I've definitely come a long way.

Q. Cassandre, obviously you started all 32 games this year. How have you seen overall your role and kind of maturity throughout your years and used that experience to now be a leader on this team and try and get Notre Dame over that hump?

CASSANDRE PROSPER: Yeah, I think my journey at Notre Dame, I've had a lot of different roles, and I feel like now in my senior year, that's a good thing because I've experienced different parts of the game. I've been injured, I've been on the bench, I've been the sixth man, and now I get to start and really lead my team.

I feel like the biggest part is that I recognize myself in every one of my teammates. I'm able to bring them along, and now it's about being all of myself on the court and knowing that my coaches, my teammates and I trust myself fully. It's been really fun to just experience this version of me on the court this year.

NIELE IVEY: Just excited to get started. I think being a part of the NCAA Tournament is a blessing, so I'm super grateful, and I'm ready to get after it tomorrow.

Q. Cassandre was just up here talking about how defense is this team's superpower, how the team turned things around the middle of February to the run that you've been on up to it. Talk about that superpower and how you've seen your defense improve over the year.

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I think something we talked about in the beginning of this year, this summer, making defense our identity this year. We have incredible defenders, incredible on-ball defenders in Cassandre and Hannah, and I think everyone became bought into that identity. Like she mentioned, the last several weeks we have just really grown in all aspects of our team defensively being just No. 1. It's something we focus on daily. It's something they

love to do. So when you have that will to work defensively, that's what carried us this season.

Q. Hannah was just up here talking about how intentional she's had to be at being a leader off the court. Obviously she has talents on the floor. I'm curious, with so much shift in the roster from last season to this year and you have Hannah back and you know what she does on the floor, how much of her growth this year has been from how intentional she's been as a leader on and off the floor?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, that's been her biggest growth. She's the type of player that comes back getting better with her game, and every year she's focused on that. But this year as she mentioned with a brand new team, that being a leader, knowing the culture, being an extension of me on the court was something that was number one for her.

She's found her voice. She's become an incredible leader, like you mentioned, off the court. In time-outs she's the main one talking. That was something that she thought about, like you mentioned, she was very intentional about how she wanted to lead this group.

Being a point guard, being somebody that has been here for three years, knowing the system very well, that was something that she really focused on.

I'm really proud of her. She has been so mature, and she's grown so much in that area, and as a point guard you need that point guard to be the leader, and that's what she's become.

Q. Was that something that just changed like that, or was it a process, and if it was a process what was it like to watch her go on that journey?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, that's something we talked about at the end of the year, beginning of the summer for her to be that leader for me. She knew that's what this group needed. She's got a lot of support from KK and Cass that also knows my system really well. Vanessa came in, and all four of them are my captains. But that's something that she knew she needed to be for this team, and she got a chance to see what that looks like for two years, so this year it was her opportunity to step in and be the leader that she wanted to be, and I think she's done a phenomenal job.

Q. Was there a tipping point -- I know the loss to Virginia, since then the team has looked like they've been on a different level. Was that kind of a tipping point for the season, or was there a moment that that really locked the team in for this end-of-the-season

run?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I think all of member was a great moment for us. I think all the highs and lows of the season, this group has been really resilient to where they turn the page the next day and go back to work.

That's something that I credit the captains, knowing that regardless, we had to show up the next day and get better.

I think, like that Virginia game on the road, that hit us hard. I think that they reset, recharged mentally and was like, we've got to get after it.

Obviously that comes from me, as well, pushing them and challenging them, but I think they just -- something did click. I will say, and I've talked about this a lot, the addition of KK Bransford into our team, our dynamic, the rotation was a big help defensively, her versatility, her experience. That helped us a lot. So I think after that game, she got a chance to get more -- she was on a minute restriction, so she got a chance to play a little bit more, and I think had a helped us, as well, but it definitely clicked around that time.

Q. We talked about Hidalgo's maturity and growth, but Prosper has definitely had maturity and growth in her own right, winning most improved player in the ACC this past year. How have you seen her mature and develop over the four years, making all 32 starts this year as opposed to just seven her first three years?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I think this summer she was very intentional to come back. She normally goes with Canada basketball and is playing all summer long, but this chance she really got a chance to really work on her game. She came back for the summer. She led us in all the workouts. Hannah competed with AmeriCup, so she had a chance to be with the team the entire summer for five, six weeks. I thought that really helped her improvement of her game, but again, like you mentioned, being a leader, being that voice for us in the summertime.

I think her role expanded. She's showing her versatility in all aspects. She's defending the 1 through 5. She's worked on her shot. She's worked on her ball handling skills. She worked on her finishes to the rim, and she's defending everybody. I have her at the 5 at times, so she's the type of player that can do whatever that team needs, and she has done whatever I've needed.

Being healthier, again, her role expanding and her consistency I think is why she's been most improved and why she's helped us so much in our success this season.

Q. Coach, how much of a challenge is it opening up

on the road because I know for so long -- I think this is only the second time since 2015 you've had the first weekend away from campus?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean, I think the comfort of being home is always a plus, but we've been battle tested all season long, and we play a really tough schedule, and even in the ACC, extremely tough schedule. We're ready, no matter what. Like I mentioned earlier, it's a blessing to be a part of this tournament, and it's a mindset that you have to have no matter if you're at home or if you're on the road. Anything is possible, so we're ready. We've been battle tested, and we're excited to get started.

Q. You've talked about even earlier this week, you kind of told us about how they've been locked in since you guys took a few days off after the Duke game, got back to practice, been locked in. What has the mood and atmosphere been with this team and the coaching staff, even in the past couple of days since you've actually got down to Columbus and you can kind of see, okay, we've got the game tomorrow, all we've been working for all season really starts now?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, we've been very locked in, business. That's the one word we talk about is this is a business trip. We approach every day in that regard, having that mindset, making sure that we're ready to practice. They're locked in in the scout. They're locked in in film. We have a lot of seniors. We have a lot of experience. They have a sense of urgency. They know what this means.

When you have a group that is mentally strong, mentally ready, focused and ready to work, it's been great. So our energy has been on a high level. We know we have to be elite in all aspects. So we approach that in everything we do. We got her late last night, had a great film session this morning and we're ready to practice.

I would say this group is hungry, they're determined, and they're very focused.

Q. You mentioned the emphasis on film, doing that this morning. What have you seen throughout that process with Fairfield?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, Fairfield just won the MAC, have dominated their league for the last couple years, playing with a ton of confidence, have won 11 straight. They average the most made threes in Division I. Our practices have been intense, defending the three-point line is a big emphasis on our defense, so we need to bring that defensive energy for 40 minutes. But a really great team, and it's a team that they play a lot of five-out, and like I said, they're very, very confident.



It's been fun. It's been fun scouting them. Our practice players have been doing a great job of trying to prepare us, and we will be ready tomorrow.

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