

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Notre Dame vs Ohio State

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Columbus, Ohio, USA

Schottenstein Center

Ohio State Buckeyes

Kevin McGuff

Elsa Lemmila

Kylee Kitts

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Notre Dame isn't as deep in the front court as you are. What's kind of the emphasis to maybe control the rebounding battle or get the ball inside? Has that been emphasized in your preparation for tomorrow?

ELSA LEMMILA: We haven't maybe emphasized anything specifically. We're still looking to just play how we normally play, and that is how we normally play is emphasis on the front court. So we're just going to try to play how we normally do.

Q. Obviously Hannah can be a pest defensively. How do you handle that? Obviously she will probably be more on the perimeter, but anything just different in prep preparing for her in particular?

ELSA LEMMILA: We've played against a lot of good defensive players before. The Big Ten is a very good defensive league, and we're just trying to reciprocate. We're also known for our defense at Ohio State, so we're just going to reciprocate and slow down and deal with it.

Q. Fell short of the Sweet 16 last year here at Ohio State. Being back in this round, being at home again, against Notre Dame, a team that's been to the Sweet 16 four straight years, how is the intensity kind of ratcheted up as you get deeper in this tournament?

ELSA LEMMILA: Well, Kylee wasn't here last year, so I'll take this one. Yeah, it was obviously a very disappointing loss last year. I can say that we have kind of a different



team this year, and we have a much different team than two years ago. So we're just trying to look to play how we normally play. I know that if we play well and how we want to play, then we will definitely be able to make it.

Q. How much are you guys college basketball junkies, how much Notre Dame did you see before the last couple days?

KYLEE KITTS: I've watched them, our whole team watched a lot of college basketball. We watched them a lot. We know that they're a good team. Yeah.

ELSA LEMMILA: Yeah, well, I mean, within our team we do pay attention a lot throughout the year, so we know, you know, the games that they have won, the games that they have lost. We have definitely paid attention to Hidalgo and all the other players on the team, so we know kind of the situation.

Q. KK Bransford is a player that played a state championship game in this building, was two-time Miss Ohio Basketball, I'm wondering what you feel like she brings to their team.

ELSA LEMMILA: She brings a lot of physicality, and she brings a lot of driving power, and she's also a really good rebounder. So in a very guard-heavy team it brings sort of a balance to them.

Q. You guys, Kevin talked about it yesterday, you guys had a nice stretch there in the first half with the press and everything going; and then kind of the second half kind of struggled and lost it a little bit there. Has that been a focus last night and today to play maybe a more consistent 40 minutes?

ELSA LEMMILA: Yeah, we definitely relaxed a little bit in the second half yesterday, which is what we were instructed not to, and we tried not to, but things happen. Yeah, we're definitely, every game we're looking to play more closer and closer to a complete 40 minutes of how we want to play, and of course yesterday maybe we didn't do that, but tomorrow we will definitely be looking for closer to 40 minutes.



KYLEE KITTS: I feel like we slipped up a little bit at the end, just like she said, we weren't necessarily supposed to. But we just need to work on playing five minutes at a time like McGuff preaches every day in practice.

Q. Do you think the 4:00 tip off start will be better tomorrow, since yesterday it was a 11:30 tip after being off for two weeks?

ELSA LEMMILA: Yeah, I think 11:30 is the earliest we've played all season and nobody was really prepared for that. Tomorrow we'll get to have a shoot around before the game, so I think that will help us a lot.

KYLEE KITTS: I think just a little bit more sleep and definitely a shoot around is definitely going to help us a lot more than the 11:30 game.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

KEVIN MCGUFF: No, we can just go right to questions that, would be good.

THE MODERATOR: First question.

Q. Going back to your time at Notre Dame wondering what you remember about Niele as a player, and then maybe how that identity comes out in her teams today?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, you know, obviously Niele was a great player and it was a privilege and honor to be on that staff to coach her. One of the things I think that really sticks out is the reason, one of the reasons she's been such an effective head coach so far is when I look back at her as a player and when we won the National Championship, she was certainly one of the leaders of the team. The thing that made her such an effective leader was her ability to connect with everybody on the team. I see that in her as a head coach, the way she connects with young people in recruiting, the way she connects with the young people in her program. It's really cool to see, and I think that's something that has put her in this position to be successful and will continue to do so.

Q. She got her career coaching started under you at Xavier about 20 years ago. She mentioned that she learned a lot from you. Wondering maybe something

you learned from her throughout maybe when she was with you at Xavier.

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I think she just very early on you could tell, just with her ability to connect with people in recruiting and when we would have kids on campus and she would be able to, whatever they want to talk about, she would be able to carry that conversation. As a head coach, she could put me in position to things that -- she could very quickly find out what was important to a young person or her parents or her family. That's invaluable, really, because that's really what recruiting is about. You could tell right away that she could do that the. She also was really, really good at, if I needed a message delivered to our players, she could do that in a way that they were going to hear it and execute it. So once again, I just think it comes back to that she has a really unique ability to connect with people and really we're in a people business and that's why she's been so successful.

Q. I wondered, both of you came out of the Muffet McGraw coaching tree. What still influences you from that experience?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, you know, people ask me that a lot about working with Muffet. And first of all I had an amazing experience, both personally and professionally. I met Letitia, my wife, there. We coached together under Muffet. So personally it was an amazing professionally I really grew as a young coach and it put me in position to get a head coaching job, and more importantly be prepared. I think the biggest thing is that on the outside people see coaches coaching, they see the Xs and the Os and they see all that type of stuff. But what I would tell you is the most successful coaches are people that run great programs. I think that's what I learned most from Muffet. The organization, the attention to detail, the way she treated people. I just feel like she ran as good a program as anybody in the country when she was the head coach at Notre Dame. And then through that process of running a great program led to amazing results. So that's really what I tried to do at any of my head coaching jobs, and so much of that was Muffet's influence.

Q. If my memory serves me correctly you were really still in very good basketball shape when you were an assistant there.

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, yeah. (Laughing).

Q. I'm wondering, did you have occasion either inside a practice or outside a practice to guard Niele? Did you guys ever go against each other?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I played in practice all the time. We

played all the time. So I loved it too. I was still young enough and in good enough shape, to your point, that I could do that back then. But they usually had me down guarding Ruth Riley. We didn't have any big people to guard Ruth. So other people were guarding Niele. But I was down there trying to fight with Ruth around the basket.

Q. Niele mentioned how close Letitia and her are and were. And they have also been talking. Have you been monitoring Letitia's conversations?

KEVIN MCGUFF: No, no, no. (Laughing). I'll let them do their thing. Obviously, yeah, we love Niele and we're both competitive people, who take very seriously the job that we have, and we're both going to show up tomorrow and put our best foot forward and try to win the game. After that we'll get back to the relationship that we have. But I know that she will have her team really prepared and they're going to play extremely hard and we're going to do the same thing. It's going to be unfortunate, because one of us isn't going to win. We know that. But we'll move -- once we get past the game we'll be back to kind of the relationship that it is. But we're both going to show up and put our best foot forward and try to win, for sure.

Q. Looking at this game, how similar, how different is a Niele Ivey-led team stylistically compared to a Muffet McGraw-led team?

KEVIN MCGUFF: You know, I think there's a lot of similarities. Both teams really emphasize defense, and I think this team that Niele has, they play man, they played all man yesterday versus Fairfield. I think that was the appropriate game plan. They will also mix in some zone, and Muffet's down that over the years. They both run really efficient offense Muffet had great guards over the years and now they have Hannah. So they both use those particular players in similar ways. So you see a lot of similarities.

Q. Looking at Hannah Hidalgo, approaching her defensively you've got a couple different options, Ava Watson has taken on some of the best point guards in the country defensively this year. Jaloni Cambridge, obviously her matchup with Hannah is going to be pivotal. And then Kennedy Cambridge, second in the country in steals to Hannah. How do you look to approach Hannah Hidalgo defensively?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I think, in general, Hannah, you're not going to necessarily stop her. But can we slow her down. We can make her really work for the shots that she gets. I think that will be the key. It's not like we're going to shut her out, but we don't want to give her anything easy, we want to make her work for the shots that she does get and

hopefully through that kind of we can have some effectiveness. But she's a terrific player, as good a guard as there is in the country.

Q. You mentioned you were practicing with Notre Dame when you were an assistant there. You mean you don't run the press now?

KEVIN MCGUFF: I do not. I do not. No, no, no. I don't get anywhere near that.

Q. You talk about how young your group is, and how in the off-season maybe you were just kind of finding what you could do and going week by week. This team though doesn't seem all year they haven't seemed to be kind of scared of the lights, scared of any opponent. Do you think this team knows or really realizes how young they are, or do they just kind of --

KEVIN MCGUFF: I don't think so. We started the year with a lot of newcomers and a lot of unknowns, and we've gotten a lot better. I think Notre Dame has too, if you look at the way they're playing now versus the beginning of the year. I think both teams have improved significantly. Notre Dame's best basketball's been the last four or five weeks, and arguably ours has been too. But for us we had a lot of unknowns, we had a lot of new people and we, to our players' credit they really committed to the concept of just getting better each week. So I don't want to say we weren't sure we were going to have it, I thought we would be good at some point, I didn't know when, and I didn't know how long it would take. But I credit our players for committing to the idea of just getting better.

Q. You mentioned that they were a sending team at the end of the year, and one of the things that I think helped them was KK Bransford coming back from injury. I think they're 17-4 with her, 6-6 without her. What do you see in her and how closely did you follow her as a high school kid in Ohio?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I followed her very closely, she was obviously a great player from down in Cincinnati. One, she plays really, really hard and she's got a high motor. She just seems to make a lot of positive winning plays when she's on the court. Whether it be a tipped basketball or a rebound or an aggressive drive and finish. And I just think it gives 'em a little more depth. I think that a combination of all that, you know, she's really helped them get to another level since she's been healthy.

Q. You mentioned going with Hannah offensively, how about Hannah on the defensive end, how do you prepare for that?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, it's hard. She's obviously a great player. She's got great instincts and very, very quick hands. I think the thing too that's really, that she's won them a lot of games because her steals tend to be like live ball turnovers in the open court that end up in uncontested layups, which are about 100 percent shots. So just if she gets X number of those, they're hard to beat, because that's X number of points that they don't even have to, aren't contested, you know. So I think our ability to just be aware of that. It's like a fine line of not over doing it where we take ourselves way out of everything we want to do. At the same time, we have to be very aware of where she is and how she's playing, because those plays can really affect the game. I mean she, you know, Louisville, end of the Louisville game, it was like a one-point game and she wins the game on a steal at mid court. So she can win the game for them like that. So we got to just be very aware of where she is. At the same time, we want to make sure we play our game.

Q. Hannah Hidalgo mentioned earlier she feels like they're the underdog and the pressure's on Ohio State to win this game being at home. How do you make sure going into that game tomorrow that you don't let the pressure overwhelm the team going in?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I think it's always, you know, it is kind of what it is. You're playing at home. I think for us we're just really trying to focus on being the best version of ourselves. Make sure we be the best version of ourselves. Make sure we play extremely hard. Just to the fundamental things that make our team good. And then play to win the game. I know until you do it you're talking about it, but those are the things that we'll be talking about.

Q. I know you mentioned yesterday post game you had at that really good stretch in the first half and then weren't happy with the second half. How much did you think that was with the 11:30 start and being off for two weeks, and how happy were you late last night when you saw this was a 4:00 start tomorrow?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I mean, I think 4:00's great. But, yeah, I think that we got off to a slow start in the first quarter. I do think that was mostly reflective of not playing for about 10 days. Then we got it kind of going in the second quarter. That's what was disappointing though about the part of the second half is like we got it going in the second quarter, so we should have been able to just keep it going. That was the thing that was disappointing is that we got a little sloppy and lost some focus and intensity when I think we shouldn't have.

Q. Jaloni, for a sophomore, just with the maturity and that level headedness, have you seen that from a

young player before and just, you know, it doesn't seem like tomorrow going up against another AP Second Teamer in Hannah is not going to face her?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Well, she's very mature, I would say wise beyond her years. I think she loves to play in big games. This will be a big game. At the same time, I think sometimes you get kids who will be like, hey, it's me versus Hannah. She's going to look at it like, hey, what can I do to impact our team to give us the best chance to win. I think Hannah will do the same thing. Having watched her and know her a little bit, like I think both of them are mature beyond their years and of course everybody knows they're both very talented, good guards, but they're going to show up and do the best they can for their team.

Q. You guys started the year unranked. How much of kind of a chip on the shoulder do you think that was for the team and that drove 'em through the season?

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, you know, I think that, yeah, I mean, there were, with a lot of newcomers and so forth there was a lot of unknowns, but I think there was an internal confidence with our players, because the one thing I'll tell you from the summer is one thing I was sure of, the only thing I was sure of, is that our chemistry was going to be really good. And that has been a big part of our growth and development and success. That started all the way back to last summer. So I think our players kind of started the season with a little bit of a quiet confidence that the basketball and the Xs and Os, if we could get better and commit to getting better, that that would come. But we had the intangibles that could allow us to be successful.

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