

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

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Columbus, Ohio, USA

Schottenstein Center

Notre Dame Fighting Irish Niele Ivey

Hannah Hidalgo

KK Bransford

Vanessa De Jesus

Media Conference

Notre Dame - 83, Ohio State - 73

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

NIELE IVEY: I would just first like to say that this is all God. This is all God. I have prayed for this moment, especially this year. This group, we believed in each other, we trusted each other, and this group were is so close knit, but all glory and honor to God, because this is just amazing is the only thing I can say. This is an incredible moment for this program, for this team, and for myself. This group gives me so much joy. I have so much joy coaching this group. And it's so amazing and rewarding to watch them reach beyond their potential to watch them come together, to watch them continue to grow and to develop the way that we've developed this season together. I'm just so, so proud of this group. Again, we're excited to keep dancing, survive and advance, we came prepared, we came ready. We were confident from the beginning of this game. We had so much balance in this game. It was incredible effort, offensively, defensively. Ohio State's a great team. Obviously on the road, really tough environment, and we pulled through and just had an incredible game. So again I'm just excited to continue playing and credit to this group, because they're just amazing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Hannah, you kind of talked all year about how this team has gone through adversity and trying to fight



through that. You guys go down 11-0, weren't fazed, come back. Why do you think this team does hard things so well?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, well first and foremost I always want to keep Christ first, because He's the reason that we got here, just like Coach said. So I give all glory to Him. Just to be able to be in this position and to keep dancing, because nobody believed in us. But I think like you said, we've been through these moments. We've been through moments where we've had rough starts and we had to crawl back. Because of that adversity, because of how we started this season, we've been able to figure it out. I'm so glad that we went through the adversity that we did in the beginning of the season, because right now is when it counts the most and we're being able to figure it out.

Q. When you guys were down like that early Coach called a timeout, you guys kind of regathered yourselves and seemed like maybe your old selves after that. How were you both able to, and this team able to kind of weather that early storm and just push through it?

KK BRANSFORD: Yeah, no, I think that us staying together. I think our experience, a lot of us are seniors and grads, and we have that experience. Like Hannah said, we've been through adversity throughout this whole entire season. So remembering that and knowing that it's a game of runs, it's a long game, that's the first couple minutes. Then we had to just sustain it.

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, just to add on, we knew it's a game of runs and coming into this game we knew they were a really good team, we knew they were going to come out hot. For us it was just facing adversity and just knowing that we'll have our time and just stepping up when we needed to.

Q. What were the magic words in that first timeout?

VANESSA DE JESUS: I think for us not settling, staying poised. It have it was a loud crowd, they have a lot of fans here. We knew it was a big game coming in. So for us it



was taking a breath, staying patient, and knowing that we put the work in, so just going out there and playing as Notre Dame.

Q. Hannah, you play with swagger, your teammates really played with swagger today, they stepped up. Can you speak to the support you got around you today.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Oh, yeah. I think I can't do anything without my teammates. The ability to step up in these big moments and everybody contributed in some way. Even if it doesn't show up on stat sheet, Leah, for example, she did a great job just knowing the scout and knowing to kind of hedge and then just kind of get back. It doesn't show up on the stat sheet, but every single piece we have on this team is so big and needed. So I'm just so grateful for my teammates and just how we've been able to step up and just play together. I think that's the biggest thing is playing together.

Q. Ohio State had a 10-0 run in the third quarter. Can you speak to your resilience, your team's resilience and what was said and why you responded the way you did in that moment?

KK BRANSFORD: Yeah, I know coming out of the third quarter we made them call the first timeout. Then, like I said, it's a game of runs. We went on our run, they went on their run. But in the fourth quarter we made them call a first timeout again and so we just remembered and learned from that third quarter to kind of not let them go on that run. It's all about defense at the end of the day. If we get stops we can get scores.

Q. You've won state championships in this building, I think you were a plus 14 in the first half after that run. Talk about what it's like to come home and play that well in front of your home fans and family, I imagine?

KK BRANSFORD: Yeah, no, it means everything. I had a lot of fans out there. My high school team or my high school team was out there. So just to be able to play in front of them, to see my family, my sister, my brother, this whole trip has been amazing. Like Hannah said in the beginning, I wouldn't be here without God, so I just thank God each and every day for that.

Q. You talked at the start there about the experience of this team, the adversity going through these moments. How much does it help to have coaches, players who have been part of the success of getting to the second weekend, like not just to get here, but to win at this stage, how much has that experience helped you guys?

KK BRANSFORD: It helps a lot. Like I said, we know what it's like to be in the tournament. We know what it's like to be down and fight back. So just having that experience, staying together. I feel like along with the experience, us just being such a close knit group helps a lot too. So those two combined I feel like we can go anywhere with that.

Q. Hannah, what did you see coming into this game, whether it be the scout or whatnot to get the opportunities to force the turnovers you guys did. I think it was 21 turnovers for Ohio State. You had eight steals there. Did you know end of the game that you were two steals away from a triple double?

HANNAH HIDALGO: No, I don't every really know my stats. I'm just out there hooping. But we knew that Ohio State, they want to play fast. Like, they're an extremely fast team. They are top with turning the ball over and then points off turnovers. So we just did a great job of just trying to slow them down. 'Loni, she was hooping, of course, so it was hard to slow her down.

But I think we were able to take everything else away and just be able to get into those passing lanes and just try and get stops. We did a great job of boxing out and then rebounding. That was phenomenal.

Q. Off that and the turnovers, the eight steals today, four against and -- 12 in the first two rounds, I'm curious just what that is for you? Is it an instinct, is it a scout game-planning thing --

HANNAH HIDALGO: We forced 12?

Q. No. Your steals were -- your steals alone.

HANNAH HIDALGO: My steals?

Q. You had 12 steals in the last two games.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Oh, okay, okay.

Q. Just for you, is that, like, an instinct thing or is that game planning scout? What do you see out there that allows you to get steals also in so many different ways?

HANNAH HIDALGO: Yeah, I feel like for me, it's just reading what the offense is doing. Thinking one step ahead, I think, is really big, just reading the passing lanes. I didn't get too many on-ball steals. I don't think I got any. So I think for me, it was a lot of off-ball and just reading what they might do next and just being ready, being

prepared to take it away. Like, that last steal when I thought I was going to be a clear path (laughing).

But, like, that last steal, it was just reading because they did it a couple times to just being, like, okay, they're going to do it again. I'll be ready to jump it, you know.

Q. I know it's been a grind to get back to where you are at now. How does it feel to be able to play and contribute and do your thing, especially coming back to the O?

KK BRANSFORD: Yes. I mean, this season has been tough, filled with adversity, just with my injury and things. So being able to have this opportunity to be here in the tournament, like I said before, it's nothing but God. So I'm just grateful to be able to do it with this group, with this coach, with this staff. Each and every day they make me get better, so I'm appreciative of that.

Q. I know you're a sweetheart, but you're a villain when you're on the road, and it's crazy the impact that you have with the fans in the stands. Have you gotten comfortable with being a villain on the road?

HANNAH HIDALGO: No, I'm not a villain (laughing).

Q. Congratulations.

HANNAH HIDALGO: Thank you. You know, I try not to be the villain. But it's fun. I think these moments are -- they're so great. To be able to play in front of big crowds like this. It's so much better, of course, playing at home in front of our fans because they feed us. But even playing in front of the Ohio State fans, they're extremely loud, they came and they showed out for their team. So just to be able to do it on somebody else's floor. We've come a long way from playing away. Like, we really struggle with away games.

So now we've been able to figure out how to play in front of other people's fans and just being able to maintain that run and silence the noise.

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

Q. I don't know if you would call this an upset, but it was a lower seed beating a higher seed. In this tournament, until this afternoon, it's had very few of those. How important is it that tournaments have moments like this?

NIELE IVEY: I think it's great for the game. I think it's great for our game. I thought for us just being the underdog, sometimes -- obviously, it was a magical game

for us, but I think, again, just having this type of upset -- and, again, like you said, we don't feel it's an upset, but having the lower seed team win, especially on the road, I think is great for the game. It just shows all the parity that's in women's basketball.

Q. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the most, how tough is this team?

NIELE IVEY: Oh, 5. This group is really tough. We have worked to get to this point as well, like Hannah mentioned. Like, we've really grown. The toughness area for us was not strong early on. I talked about it a lot. Our consistency -- you know, we had some really tough losses. We had to learn a lot. This group, they had to learn each other, and I had to learn this group.

So we have really fought through the adversity this season and really the last several weeks have become more tough. That's just with our defenses, with our rebounding. It's our intensity that we've shown up with. But it has grown over time this season.

Q. With where you guys were in the middle of January to now win -- I think it's 11-13, and this is your 15th straight trip to the Sweet 16. Just how satisfying is that?

NIELE IVEY: So satisfying. I'm so grateful to do it with this group. I've talked about it a lot. They give me a lot of joy. I love coming to work every day working with this group. They're such an incredible group of young women. They work so hard. They love each other. It's just great energy, great vibes.

But again, it's hard getting to this point. It's really hard to get past the first and second rounds. So to be able to do it with this group that I love so much is amazing. I'm really super satisfied, I'm really grateful, and so excited and proud of our team.

Q. On that last note, you've had -- both as a player and as a coach, you've had a lot of big wins, whether it be upsets or not. With everything that goes into tournament games like this, we don't know what that's like, we don't know how that feels, how would you describe just how it feels when you've put in all that work and then it pays off and you actually win?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, so gratifying because there's so much work that goes behind the scenes. I have an incredible coaching staff, so I credit them having this team ready every night, every practice, supporting me. You know, I have to do a lot, so having a great support staff -- coaching staff, support staff. I have so many people and so many



people that surrounds this program that helps us to be elite. Luckily I've had a lot of experience being a part of a really incredible program in Notre Dame and learning under Coach McGraw, but to be able to do this at a high level you have to have great people around you and Notre Dame is full of great people.

Q. Some of the players that you got out of the portal weren't big stars at their former schools. Vanessa de Jesus is one of 'em. What did you see in her specifically that allowed you to think she could have a moment like tonight, scoring and bringing the ball up against people that are as fast as Hannah?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, just doing the proper research. I needed another ball handler. I was looking at that from the portal. Playing against V, I always felt like she's just a solid, hard-nosed point guard. Then doing my research, talking to her AAU coach, they just told me that she's a culture kid. She would be a perfect Notre Dame fit. So she checked all the boxes that I look for in the portal.

Sometimes it's not just talent. It's character. And she checked all those boxes. She's just tough. So when she came to campus I was like, yeah, everything that her AAU coach told me that she was about her, it was exactly. She's very disciplined, very business-oriented, and she's exactly what we needed.

I'm really proud of her because she's playing a different role. She's almost the point guard. I put Hannah off the ball. She's running the point. She had to handle Ohio State's pressure, press, the entire season. So she's really evolved in her position. But she's just a phenomenal young woman on and off the court.

Q. This is one of the most emotional I've seen you after a game. Why did this game mean so much to you?

NIELE IVEY: Because it's so hard. It's so hard to get to the Sweet 16. It just is. It's hard to win -- it's hard to get to the tournament. It's hard to win the first round. And to do this with this incredible group, seven scholarship players, on the road, it's really hard to do. So I think that's where my emotions comes in, because I'm so grateful. I know that I'm blessed. I know that I have -- again, that God has aligned me with this particular team that has really just brought so much joy to this program. I just love 'em. I love seeing them improve.

So I think that's where I'm more emotional, because it has not been easy. So when you know that you've gone through the fire, you've gone through the storm, and you still come out on top is the reason why I'm just so grateful.

Q. It looked like after The Ohio State started 11-0, you went to some drop coverage on their bigs. Can you --

NIELE IVEY: I wasn't trying to.

Q. Okay. Can you talk about whatever decision you did make and how that slowed down Jalon from getting downhill a little bit?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, you know, it's funny because I was looking to try to ice her, keep her to one side of the floor. I had to change it up because she's an amazing guard at 41 points. So I was just trying to throw some different things at her.

So sometimes it was drop, sometimes we switched. Second half we got in a little bit of foul trouble, so I put more size on her and had Cass guarding her, but we did try to change up the ball screen coverage.

Q. You had three great players up here, but two that wasn't up here really made a huge impact, Prospect and Moore. Talk about them a little bit.

NIELE IVEY: Absolutely. Iyana's been playing incredible basketball. She's shooting such a high percentage from three. She has really turned it on in February, just getting comfortable. She was injured, had surgery early in the season and I feel like in February she really got comfortable. Worked her way into the starting lineup, and has really been a key to our success. Floor spacer but also her experience, her poise has been tremendous. So she's been an incredible bonus for us.

And then Cass, I can't say enough about Cass. There's a reason why she's ACC most improved. She's come back. She runs through a wall for me. She runs through a wall for this team. She plays every position that you can play on the court as far as defensively, offensively she's worked on every aspect of her game. But for me she's a pro. She knows -- she's very, very business oriented and she just does whatever this team needs. Those two are just a big piece of our success. Just her consistency. Iyana is very consistent and Cass has been extremely consistent, but I feel like because Cass is also a two-way player. I don't think we talk about her enough. She can really defend. I had her at the 5 a lot, playing the center, she's guarding 6'-6" post players, so she's just tremendous. Her versatility is unmatched.

Q. You talked earlier about how hard it is to get to the Sweet 16. This program has done it consistently though. Why do you think that is? Why do you think Notre Dame is consistently able to get to this point and

win in games like this?

NIELE IVEY: Yeah, I mean it's a standard that we have at Notre Dame. It's a standard that I've been a part of as a player since '96. And no matter what, no matter our seed, no matter our road, we're going to come in with that mindset, I've got an obviously I've been in the NCAA tournament as a player, so I know, you know, we have the blueprint of that, but it's that standard, that standard of excellence that we're always trying to get back to.

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