

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Green Bay vs Alabama

Friday, March 21, 2025

College Park, Maryland, USA

XFINITY Center

Green Bay Phoenix

Coach Kayla Karius

Natalie McNeal

Maddy Schreiber

Media Conference

Kentucky 79, Liberty 78

Q. Natalie and Maddy, you've had some much success throughout your college career. It's rare that a coaching change would be so seamless. With a first year head coach, what was it about this team that adjusted so well?

NATALIE MCNEAL: Well, I think a big part of it is Coach Kayla is an alumni of this program and she knows -- kind of knew what she was coming into and the way at that a lot of us operate on the Green Bay.

I think she was a big part of setting that. We're really big on our community and alumni in Green Bay and what means to play Green Bay basketball.

She had a full understanding of what that was. So it's been really cool to develop a working relationship with her throughout the year. I think it's really awesome that we get to do it at this stage as well.

MADDY SCHREIBER: Building off that I would say she was very willing to meet us halfway when coming in. She knew we all came back after Coach Borseth left and she was really willing to work with us and meet us halfway on a lot of things.

It proved to work out and be very successful for us.

Q. You are a senior-led team. There are seven of you guys coming back and a 22-game winning streak. How would you describe your confidence level coming into this game?



MADDY SCHREIBER: Yeah, I would say we are very confident within each other and playing with each other. We all believe in each other. Having seven seniors on a team is very rare and I think also is really huge.

We are all able coach and lead each other, so we are very confident within each other which is really helpful going into this game.

NATALIE MCNEAL: Yeah, like you said, and like Maddy said, we have seven seniors so a lot of us are just trying to extend our career as much as possible at this point. So I think there is a part of that that goes in too.

Coming in and being confident. We've been on this stage before, so being confident in not only ourselves, but our teammates and our coaching staff.

Q. You guys talked about that you have been here before. How would you say last year's experience is going to help you going into this year?

NATALIE MCNEAL: Yeah, I think there is a little bit more of an expectation just kind of what happens on the outside beyond the game with just coming in, practicing, playing at a neutral site, and then also everything this goes on around it.

So I think that we have our head on straight a little bit more about that. So we have a little bit of an expectation, which is good. Just knowing we have played on this stage before and being confident in our ability that we deserve to be here. We earned the right to play on this stage. So just being more confident in ourselves and each other.

MADDY SCHREIBER: Yeah, I would have to agree. It's not new this year. Last year we didn't have our heads on exactly straight. It was all kind of brand new. This year we are more experienced in what it's going to be like, and having that experience is really going to help us in pushing forward.

Q. I think one of the things that struck me when I was referencing your team is that Kayla makes more



money than her male counterpart at your school. To you, what kind of message does that send about women's basketball and also how would you describe her as a coach and leader?

NATALIE MCNEAL: Yeah, I think it's a really cool thing. Obviously she is a great coach so she deserves to be where she is.

Kayla is a great person. I think something that really stands out to me in the way she coaches is she cares about all of us as players first. As much as she -- or as people first. As much as she would love for us all to go out and do our best every night, she has an understanding of it's okay; we are people. We have lives outside of basketball and she can respect that.

I think it's really cool. She has a really big heart and cares about the program, and not only us as players, but what it means to play at Green Bay and be a part of Green Bay basketball.

So I think that's really cool. And also she's very determined and very particular in what she wants. That pushes us all to be a lot better.

MADDY SCHREIBER: Similar to what Natalie said I think it speaks to the person she is. She's very huge in, like Natalie said, person first, player second. Being very personal person.

So yeah, going off that, I guess she's just really huge on putting us first as people. I think that speaks to who she is as a person.

KAYLA KARIUS: Thanks. We're really excited to be here. The 20th appearance in the NCAA tournament for our amazing storied program. Was a part of several of these as a player so it has come full circle for me to be back here as a coach.

I'm just ridiculously proud of this group that I am so honored to coach every day. I think we've had such a great transition, which I think for a lot of teams and for a lot of players would be a really hard thing. Knowing that your coach of a long long time retired last season and not really knowing who's going to be coming in.

We've handled the transition really well. All credit to our players who have made it go extra smooth, and have really enjoyed time together this season. After a challenging non-conference schedule, we have put things together pretty well here during conference play.

Continue I think at this point to be playing our best

basketball, which is what you want to be doing in March.

Q. Curious, when you guys go through a conference tournament situation like you all have to when you've been undefeated all season, what that's pressure like? Is it any kind of relief to be able to be the hunter in this tournament?

KAYLA KARIUS: Yeah, that's a feeling that's really familiar among any player that's been in this program. I think when you get to the point we did during conference play, you know that you have to win the conference tournament in order to have an opportunity here at the Big Dance. Just the way our non-conference played out.

So every game gets a little bit bigger and bigger. We talk well before that moment, all season long we really felt as repeat tournament champs that the target will be on our back. That's nothing new that this program hasn't experienced here in the last 20 years.

So maybe it's a little bit of a different feeling, but I think our players embrace it all the more. I think they just continue to approach every game the same way. And we use the phrase: Pressure is a privilege quite often. You would rather be in that position rather than trying to chase somebody else all the time. I think our players have lived that day in and day out.

Q. I was wondering what has this season been like for you personally coming back to a team that you were are such a star player for having led the team to three NCAA tournaments, I guess a Sweet 16 as well? What has had been like for you?

KAYLA KARIUS: Well, it's hard to put into words. It's really a come full circle type of moment. It's a position I remember sitting up here at this very stage as a player. Now I just can see it from the other side. I think every since I was a junior when I was playing, this was my dream, to be a college coach. I just loved the experience so much.

And I owe everything to Green Bay. That place shaped me, continued to develop me as a basketball player. But I think more than that, this program, it mentors teaches young women how to be well-rounded people. We have the most amazing community and fans behind us. We have a university and chancellor who are a100% behind us and supportive of making women's basketball a priority, which is not always a common thing throughout the country.

I've seen that at different programs. This is the No. 1 priority at that university. They really take care of us and

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

want us to shine. I think that's important. You see that now at this role probably more so than you do as a player. I had the opportunity after I was done playing to play professionally and start my coaching career and go all over the place. That was great too, because you come to appreciate what you really have at this program. It's not same everywhere culture-wise and university-wise and support-wise, and I think that it's amazing to think I'm sitting here right now.

I think at some point along the way this became my dream job. Just became a goal of mine. Just put my head down and kept working and everything aligned this year.

I can't thank enough Coach Borseth who set this program up, the foundation he's laid. He has done an amazing job and he continues to support and mentor me. He's retired but he can't stay away from it.

Again, I think everything in this program is about the players, and kind of always has been. Our culture is about our older players teaching our younger players and leading the way. I think they've continued to do that. The culture, the Green Bay way is really going strong.

Q. I had read that you actually do make more than your male counterpart in the basketball side. I just wondering like how does that feel to you when you learn that for the first time? And you also have talked about the support the university provides to the woman's program. What's the message you would like that to send more broadly?

KAYLA KARIUS: Yeah, I think it goes back to our university, our chancellor, our athletic director, and our whole community really prioritizing our women's basketball program. I don't really necessarily look at it like myself versus Coach Gottlieb. I have great respect for him and the up and coming coach that he is.

So it is nothing in comparison to him. I think it's a lot more to be said about women's basketball and the rise of it and in most recent years how much popularity it's gained and how it's on a bigger stage and it's more visible to our young girls who can watch and find a female role model now to watch and follow.

I think that's an amazing thing. So I'm really happy to be a small part of that. I think the thinking that it says is that we love women's basketball in Green Bay. (Smiling.)

Q. I'm curious, your relationship with the players, you're a young coach. Many of them feel like they can relate to you. When they sat down and we asked them about you they said you met them halfway.

KAYLA KARIUS: Yeah.

Q. Could you describe what that's like?

KAYLA KARIUS: Yeah. I think a lot of that had to do with what our team looked like last spring when I came in. That group of of course seniors, six of them at the time, but underclassmen as well, enjoyed the season that they had and loved the experience they had at Green Bay. Even though the coach decided he was going to retire, that group got together and said, we want to stay here. We want to stay together. We want to go and have another great season.

For a lot of them it was going to be their fourth or fifth or sometimes sixth year. I think that says a lot about the culture that they have. So then I came in as the new head coach and I think it's important that you set the stage right away with some of your initial conversations.

I, again, a player here I understood the system and I understood what worked here. I also went through a coaching change. I was coming in to be a freshmen. Coach Borseth who recruited me took the Michigan job and coach Matt Bollant came in and was my new head coach.

Seemed like everything I was planning to go and do changed because there was a new leader. I know how this feels. Now, I was coming in as a freshmen, not going into my final year, which I think is even more uneasy. They want everything in their senior year. Every player does. They want to play a lot, achieve a lot. This year was going to be no different.

So it's really important to me when I sat down with them, right away I told them I'm not coming in here to change everything. You are clearly really good at everything that you do now. What I can say that I've been watching you and I think there are tweaks we can make and improvements we can make in certain areas of the team that will help us going forward.

Plus, I'm not Coach Borseth. I have a different personalities and different leadership styles probably and there will be different changes. But we will have to work through those together. Meeting them halfway really meant that I wasn't going to come in and dictate everything. I want them to have a voice.

If you watch us practice or even if you watch games, you can see them all coaching each other and talking to each other. It's quite often that I go to them and ask for their input. As a player I remember how that felt. It's really important that your coaches trust you enough to ask for

input.

They're the ones out there guarding the ball screen. They are the ones out the running a set or an offense. They have to feel really comfortable in what you're doing. I believe by giving them a voice you show them that you trust them and you give them more investment in what's about to happen.

Meeting them halfway has been an ongoing process. I think a lot early on and it's maybe tapered off a little bit because we understand each other more. But ongoing conversations. Not like I'm the boss so I am telling you what to do, but more so let's do this all together.

Q. They mentioned that last year they felt like their heads weren't in the right place for the NCAA tournament. How much did that loss to Tennessee I guess come up in your preparation this time and what -- how they learned from that, what they can expect coming in?

KAYLA KARIUS: Yeah, I knew how they felt about it pretty early on. We talked about it. You could just tell right away it left a bitter taste in their mouth. They felt they were better than what they put out there. They wanted to show more, improve a little bit more than the final score indicated. Now, we hadn't touched that subject probably until recently when this opportunity came along.

But, again, giving them a voice. We talk after practice. I'm not always the one who's talking. Give them an opportunity to speak up, and it was several seniors who mentioned they've been here before. They know what this feels like. Yet they're aching for more. For us getting to the tournament is not the end goal.

Just like win long the conferences tournament, that's not the end goal. It's in the tonight get here it's to achieve and win games here. They want more than what they would last year. So I think you don't fully understand something totally until you've gone through it at least once. It just feels a little bit different to them now. I see a different confidence about them. They're approaching this differently than they did last year because they've already experienced it and now they want more.

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