

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - North Carolina vs West Virginia

Friday, March 21, 2025

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

Carmichael Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels

Alyssa Ustby

Maria Gakdeng

Lexi Donarski

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to North Carolina's press conference. Today for North Carolina we have Alyssa Ustby, Maria Gakdeng and Lexi Donarski. Questions, please.

Q. I just wanted to ask, from COVID season when there were barely any fans in the stand to now that you are hosting NCAA Tournament games, how much are you looking forward to this moment tomorrow?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, I'm really excited for tomorrow because I've been able to witness firsthand the growth of this program from, like you said, 2020 during COVID all the way to what it is now. I just credit all the great people that have come here and have poured everything they had into this program to get it where it is today.

Q. Alyssa, on that note kind of with growth of the program, what does it mean just to have a game first round at home and kind of see that come to fruition?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, it means a lot. Hosting was one of our goals in the beginning of the season. To finally have it be tomorrow is something that's super exciting. All of us girls have been working really hard all season. So it's just something that we're honored to be able to give back to the community because we have so many great fans in Carmichael that continue to support us every single game.

It only feels right to bring them the first two rounds of the March Madness tournament home.

Q. For Maria, Coach Banghart always calls you, quote, a problem. Why do you think you're, quote, a problem



for other teams?

MARIA GAKDENG: Just knowing everybody knows that -- we know as a team and other teams know when we play them, like, once I get the ball in the low post, there's no answer for me. That's why she calls me a problem every game.

So just knowing that once we, like, play through me, get the ball to me, but knowing the double is coming, but also know how to play out of doubles, score easily. I feel like that's the reason I'm a problem, so yeah.

Q. For all three of you, what is your first March Madness memory watching as a kid? Is there a game you remember, a play you remember? Someone said the other day the Arike shot to beat UConn was their first memory. Is there anything you remember as a kid watching March Madness?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, I would say as a kid when March Madness started in the round of 64 and 32, my parents always took me and my sister out of school to watch basketball all day. That's where it started, in elementary school. These are the days that we got off school just to watch a lot of basketball, and it was a lot of fun.

MARIA GAKDENG: I would say there was no set memory, but in class having those brackets, setting up brackets with your class, and then watching games throughout the school day, I feel like that was so much fun with your friends. So now being able to be that person on TV that kids are watching has been, like, a full-circle moment.

ALYSSA USTBY: My answer is similar to Maria's. I would fill out brackets in middle school, and I would usually pick the teams I thought would win based on their school colors or their mascots because that's all I really knew about basketball at the time.

Q. I'm curious what you have seen kind of on film of Oregon State and what you're sort of prepared for, what stood out to you about them?

ALYSSA USTBY: Oregon State has some good length,



and we've played against length before in Kentucky. So we just have a similar mindset going into that game of how you play against height, which we want to make a move side to side and not as much try to compete with them by putting shots over top of them.

So just kind of reminding ourselves of those principles because we haven't played a team with such great height in a while.

MARIA GAKDENG: I would say making sure we get out in transition, knowing that they can't really keep up with us as we get the ball down the floor. Rebounding, getting out. They have scrappy guards and some big post players, and they play a lot of zone, so making sure that we just keep moving, get the ball moving in the zone.

LEXI DONARSKI: I agree with what they said. Just play with speed to counteract their height.

Q. Lexi or Maria, what have you learned late in the season when Alyssa and Reniya were out? How important was it to persevere through that and bounce back in ACC tournament when they returned?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, this team is so connected. Obviously we want them to be playing with us, and those games were challenging when they weren't, but just playing for them because we know that they still want us to succeed even though they can't be out on the court with us and just making it through each game until they're back with us, which thankfully they both are now. Yeah, just really coming together and fighting.

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, just continuing for both of us to keep playing our roles as captains, as starters, but having those people off the bench that we know we have a deep bench, we know people that we can play and having them come on the floor, making sure that they know that we're confident in them and that we can keep playing without our other two starters, but playing for them was really important, so...

Q. As you sit here in this practice gym and you think about your five years here and having the opportunity to host now, what does all that mean to you for your role in this program?

ALYSSA USTBY: It's super special. Even, like you said, being in this practice gym, this wasn't here for majority of my career. Like I stated before, just to witness the growth firsthand of this program and all of the elements that come with it is something that's super special. I've been wanting to host every single year that we've had the opportunity to in March.

It feels good to finally get over that hump, and I felt like we finally had the right pieces that were all bought into the same goal, the same mission, and it's just really rewarding. We put in so much work since in the beginning of the summer, so we're finally reaping those benefits now.

Q. Alyssa, just a follow-up to my question before. Was Carolina far on your bracket as a kid because of the color scheme and the mascot?

ALYSSA USTBY: Of course, yes. Like, Carolina blue is my favorite color, so they were always making it.

Q. Just what is Coach Banghart like as a coach? I know from her time as Princeton she was a player-led type coach. What is she like for you guys?

LEXI DONARSKI: She cares a lot. She does what she needs to to get the most out of all of us, both as a team and individually. She'll push us. She'll get on us when she needs to, but really she's really good at just building that team atmosphere that brings us all together so we can be a player-led team because you need leadership on the court to win big games.

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, very effective coaching. I would say she's very solution-oriented. We ran into a lot of injuries last year, but even this year we had to just regroup a couple of times, and I think we fared well no matter what.

I think she does a great job of making sure that we all know that we're confident with each other to go out and win games.

ALYSSA USTBY: Something that I admire about Coach Banghart is how every single year she's had a different team, and those teams have had different needs. I felt like this year she's done a really good job at infusing all of us with confidence because we all have the basketball IQ and the understanding of how we need to play the game and what the game plan is. So her role has been really great and just infusing us with confidence and making sure that we feel prepared and ready to go out and do what we already know what we can.

Q. For all three of you, obviously we're in your practice gym and interviewing you in a different setting. Are you're still at home, but how has this week felt different? I know March Madness branding and all that, but has it felt strange at all practicing in this setting?

ALYSSA USTBY: It has felt a little different just because of the access to our facilities is a lot different, and we have

different schedules that we have to kind of work our days around, but although it's kind of weird, it feels special. Like, it feels like something that we've earned and something that we're excited for.

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, I would say it is a little bit weird, but a good feeling to it. Especially since, like, last year we had to travel to get ready to play over in South Carolina, and then for me the year before that this wasn't even a reality for me, like, playing in the tournament.

This is a weird feeling, but I think we've earned it, so I'm proud of us.

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, I would just say that we're all seniors too, so this is our last time to take all of that in. I feel like we've really been doing that all week long. We will continue to as we get closer and closer to game time.

Q. Lexi, earlier Lys talked about pieces and how this team has the right pieces. You were a player that didn't have a relationship with Coach gang Hart when you went into the portal, but she sought you out as a piece to make this all click. What does that mean to you?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, I mean, it means a lot. Coach Banghart is a great recruiter, and the second I started talking to her and got on campus, I'm, like, that's someone I want to play for, that's a program I want to be a part of. It means a lot, and I really enjoy my time at Carolina and want to keep the season going as long as we can.

Q. Alyssa, you obviously didn't get to play here in Carmichael on your Senior Night, so how special is it for you to get to play potentially two more games in Carmichael and kind of have a senior night of your own?

ALYSSA USTBY: It's a great question. Not being able to play on my Senior Night was absolutely heartbreaking. I was so upset that I didn't get to play on the court that I've poured so much into for the last five years. So that made me even more urgent to secure that hosting spot.

That drove a lot of my, like, recovery process. I wanted to get back as fast as I could from injury just to help my team make sure that we secured that opportunity for a host so that I could play on that Carmichael court again, and I'm so, so excited.

Again, I just can't reiterate enough of how proud I am of this group for getting that done and finally get to play on the court again.

Q. Alyssa, you not only have seen this program grow, but you've seen women's sports and women's basketball in particular grow from a few years ago being able to finally officially say March Madness, and now this year with the units. What do you think about how you've experienced the growth of the women's basketball game, and where do you hope it goes in the future?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah, I've been really fortunate to be alongside so many women's basketball players that have a lot of courage and use their voices to speak up for change and have been just trailblazers in that industry, whether they're still in college or coming into college and especially the WNBA. There are so many players that contributed to growing this game where it needs to go.

I see it just continuing to expand. The coolest thing I've seen is I have three older brothers, and none of them watched any women's sports, especially women's basketball because it just can't seem like that was something they were interested in. Now all they care about is women's basketball.

They found a different sense of joy and pride in what the women's game offers over the men's. It's been really cool to witness firsthand how the change has impacted my life directly and my family's.

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