

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Western Illinois vs North Carolina

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

Carmichael Arena

Western Illinois Leathernecks

Coach JD Gravina

Addi Brownfield

Mia Nicastro

Media Conference

Q. You guys joined the OVC in 2023. What does that mean to you guys to come into that conference early and win the championship in their first year and then get an automatic bid to March Madness?

ADDI BROWNFIELD: Yeah, I just think it was a big deal for us. It proves that Western Illinois belongs in the OVC and we can compete and we can win championships in the OVC.

Getting to represent our conference here means a lot to us, and we wear that title proudly. We're just going to go out there and do our best to make the OVC crowd and the rest of Western Illinois University.

MIA NICASTRO: Yeah, just to go off what Addi said, it's a privilege and honor to represent Western on the national stage. We're incredibly proud to be here on behalf of the OVC, a conference that is really on the rise, especially in terms of women's basketball, and we're just excited to make everyone back home proud, and hopefully give UNC a good game.

Q. On your team Instagram account you have #onegoal on every single post. What does that mean to you, and what is your goal? Obviously to win games, but what does that sentiment bring to you guys?

MIA NICASTRO: Yeah, well, obviously our goal all season since we came in the summer was to win the OVC tournament. That's always the goal, the end goal that we've had. So now we've accomplished that this year, so



you kind of have to find a new goal.

I think that's what's special about this team is we're not content with just -- we accomplished our one goal, and now we're happy. We want to keep achieving greatness and striving for excellence, and that's what we're going to continue to do throughout this tournament.

ADDI BROWNFIELD: Yeah, it's been our goal since July we've been talking about this, conference championship, getting to March Madness and reaching a goal that big, it's not linear. There's going to be ups and downs and struggles along the way and remembering that #onegoal, remembering what our end goal was has really been huge for us, and just getting through failure, success, remembering what that end goal is is getting to March Madness.

Now that we're here, like Mia said, there's new goals set, and I saw -- I think it was the Arizona State coach said, you don't get participation awards here, so now that we're here we're going to work really hard and do the best that we can to represent Western on the national stage.

Q. What's it going to take in order to compete with this North Carolina team that's obviously very talented and very lengthy in size that you guys might not have?

ADDI BROWNFIELD: Yeah, North Carolina is obviously extremely talented team, but I think one thing that we have is seniority. We have a lot of seniors that aren't quite ready to be done with basketball and we're going to give it our all to get whatever extra games we can. So just using that experience, using that seniority to fuel us and try to compete our best out there on the court.

MIA NICASTRO: Yeah, whatever team we ended up drawing was obviously going to be a great team, and we knew that we weren't going to be the favorites heading into it. I think that just gives us a little bit of a chip on our shoulder. Something that I think we do really well in games where we're technically not favored is we play really scrappy and we play really fast. We're a really fast-paced team. We get up and down.



That rattles teams, no matter if it's low major, high major, whatever. At the end of the day, you've all trained the same way for this moment, you've all prepared the same way for this moment. So I think it's just a matter of not letting the moment get too big and playing our game and believing in ourselves and just playing Leatherneck basketball.

Q. What has gone into your success in road games when you've been able to pull those out, since you are going to be in one tomorrow?

MIA NICASTRO: Yeah, I think just knowing going in that playing on the road is tough. You kind of have to have an extra level of focus and an extra level of maybe drive to kind of be successful.

They kind of have the advantage playing at home, playing on their home court, where we're coming in as the underdogs on the road. It's going to be tough. Either way, it's going to be a battle. But it doesn't matter; at the end of the day, it's the same 94 feet that you've been playing on all year, so that can't really contribute. We have to go in with the same mindset we would as if it was a home game.

ADDI BROWNFIELD: Yeah, JD always tells us, defense travels, and the I think that's something we've completely changed from last year is our defensive effort as a whole team. I think that's something that we're going to bring. We're going to bring the energy, like Mia said, we're going to be scrappy, and that's always something we can carry with us, home or away. So defense for sure.

Q. Addi, you've been with the Leathernecks for all four years. Now here you are in the NCAA tournament. What has this opportunity meant for you and how have you enjoyed this experience so far?

ADDI BROWNFIELD: Yeah, I have just loved every moment of being a Leatherneck, and I just feel so truly grateful and blessed that I found my forever home at Western. Unfortunately a lot of girls have not such great college experiences where they're not happy where they're at, they don't enjoy basketball, and that just hasn't been the case for me at all. In fact, being at Western has made me love basketball even more. From seeing how far we've come from my freshman year, it's truly a beautiful thing. It's been the goal for four years is getting to March Madness, getting to March Madness, and this year I could truly feel it, that this was the year we were going to get it done.

I'm just so proud of our whole team, so proud of our coaches, our community. This means so much to us, so much to all of Macomb, and just feeling really blessed for

this opportunity.

Q. Mia, this is your second time at the NCAA Tournament. You have some NIT appearances as well. What have you seen out of this team compared to the other three years, Saint Louis and Western Illinois?

MIA NICASTRO: Yeah, I think the main difference between definitely here and my first NCAA Tournament appearance is just I'm playing a different role. It's a little different this time around as a senior because you kind of know this is kind of your last opportunity.

But outside of the individual perspective, I think we just have such -- it's a different feeling because we have felt so much like a family all year. This is just such a special team, and it's kind of indescribable what this means to me, being able to take this team to March Madness versus my experience at SLU.

Then just compared to last year with our NIT run, there's just so much more confidence in the team this year, so much more -- obviously we've always had really good chemistry, but just so much more love this year. We're just so much closer, and going back to the one goal kind of perspective, I think we have bought in so much to this one goal that we've had all year, and everyone, no matter their role on this team this year, has believed in it and fought for it. Now here we are, and we don't want to go home.

Q. Coach, you've been with the leather necks 15 seasons now. You're going on your best season yet. You went to the tournament in 2017. How is this moment representative of all the hard work and the accumulation of all your progress with the team throughout this program for these past 15 years?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, it's pretty emotional to kind of look back over being here 15 years. We had kind of a magical run, I think, in 2017 to be able to make it to the NCAA Tournament.

I think through the years, there's times wondering if you'll ever get to do it again. It just makes it so much more special when I feel like you've really got to work for it. We're a team that has to kind of start over and build. It's been a work in progress here, especially over the last four years. I think it was huge this year, going into this year from last year, we did not have one player in the transfer portal, and I think that's a big part of the reason that we're here now, and that's something that makes me really proud.

A lot of it was recruiting great people. People around Macomb, Illinois, and Western Illinois will vouch for how

phenomenal our student-athletes are, and when you have that love for each other and have that common goal, I think it helps propel you to this moment.

Q. I talked to Addi and Mia about your mantra, #onegoal on every post throughout any media that you guys have produced. Can you elaborate on that to someone who doesn't know your team as well?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, I think one of them talked about the highs and lows of the season. I think that's an important part of goal setting. We had a great pregame talk from one of our players, pastors actually, before we played the University of Iowa, and it was just about the ups and downs of the season and how on this road to achieving that one goal, it isn't just linear.

I think that really made us embrace some of the tougher moments of the season and we had some really tough ones. It would have been easy for us to really quit on that one goal when Raegan McCowan went down in our first conference game, and to kind of have that in mind and to be able to continue to work on that or when we lost a tough road game in conference, I think that having that end game and knowing that a loss here or there doesn't necessarily take away that one goal you have, it kind of keeps you motivated.

Q. This is your second time coaching in the NCAA Tournament. What lessons did you learn from that first time that you can maybe carry over to this weekend?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, quite a few. It was obviously a different experience. But going and playing on Florida State's home court I think is a similarity. Being the 15 seed was a little bit tougher.

But like Mia said, anyone you play at this level is going to be really good.

One lesson I learned was I did a rap for my pregame speech, so I had my big moment right before the game, they put the camera on me and there's my name, and they put JD "Vanilla Ice" Gravina, so that was a little bit embarrassing, so maybe I won't do a rap before the game.

No, I think making sure the players recognize the moment is not too big for them, and part of it that really helped is we went and we had a seven- or nine-point lead at Florida State that year. We went into the locker room down two points against a team like UNC that's probably going to beat us 19 out of 20 times, nine out of 10, 99 out of 100, it doesn't matter; you're looking for that one time. You're trying to find that one time. So making sure the players

understand that, that while the odds may be stacked against us, there's still that chance.

I think that can help excite them, and then to enjoy it. It did seem to happen really fast. It's so much, the media. An article in USA Today, the Chicago Tribune picked up an AP article. It's just so awesome for our university.

But that moment, it doesn't last very long, so we've got to really soak it up and enjoy it.

Q. What is the value of kind of going to a different part of the country? Looks like you're mostly in the regular season staying close to home. Is there a certain value in that, of kind of exposure and that type of thing?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, absolutely. Just to have some national media here today is awesome for our program.

I think that there's also the excitement level from the players. When our name popped up with North Carolina, I think there's been some talk we might go to an Iowa or Cincinnati and just getting to hop on that NCAA charter flight and come experience something -- but I think from our small community of Macomb and our Western Illinois University community, it really helps with that exposure. I was sitting in a restaurant the other day and saw our name pop up on the ticker and they were talking about our team, and I think the more people can hear about our great university, I think it's kind of a hidden gem. So when you get on this national stage and you get to come to a great location, I think it kind of helps support that.

Q. How have you mentally prepared this team for tomorrow's matchup?

JD GRAVINA: Good question. It's hard to do because it can go a lot of different ways. There are some good ways it can go and it can start off bad and you've got to be able to keep the wheels from falling off the wagon and trying to get back into it. We've talked about how there's quite a few different ways we could win this game. As a coach I've beat Tara VanDerveer at Stanford and I've kind of showed that roadmap. We beat the University of Illinois and it was a completely different roadmap. We kind of got out on them early and then held on. Letting our players know there's a lot of different ways this game could go, and whatever way it goes, it's still a roadmap to being successful.

Then again, part of it is we've been a team all year that's really enjoyed each other. We're a fairly laid-back team. You see that at our shootaround, our open practice. It just seems like a bunch of really good friends hanging out. The players like to tease me a lot. So still trying to keep things

kind of loose I think is important when you're playing on such a big stage.

Q. Coach, you talked about community, and I saw a video posted about you guys having every member from the community talk about what this moment means to them. What do you think this means to the community, and what has been the response from fans for you?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, I think that's such an important part of this. Our community is really special, and I think it's hard for bigger schools to understand what Western Illinois University means to the Macomb community.

When things are tough, whether that's just things around the country that are hard, when something really special happens in your community, it just uplifts everybody. One of my favorite videos from our conference tournament game was the video at our local sports corner that was just a completely sold-out watch party and people are just going nuts during the game.

That's really special. I think that our players are out in the community, so the young, especially girls, in our community know our players by name. They all have autographed shirts by them. I have young kids; Macomb is our home. That just makes everything a lot more special, I think, when you really feel like you're representing your community on something, again, on the national stage.

Q. If someone was unfamiliar with all of Western Illinois and the university and your basketball team, what would you tell them to describe the university and the basketball team?

JD GRAVINA: When I got hired at Western Illinois, the best description of it was that it was a people-rich university. I think that's true today. I just think it's a place where there's just great people that all care about each other, that care about what we're doing. They care about women's basketball. Our crowd was phenomenal, especially as we were kind of going through the conference slate.

I think the university is a people-rich place. When students come here, they connect with our faculty because it is a smaller school. They know their faculty personally as opposed to being taught by a lot of TAs or that sort of thing.

That helps -- our team GPA was it was top 5 in the nation this year. It's been like that almost every year, and I attribute a lot of that to recruiting smart kids but a lot of that to the support of faculty. A lot of places it might seem like

it's the faculty versus athletics, but at Western Illinois University we're definitely all in it together. That makes it a really special place. But to answer your question, I would say just being a people-rich community, a people-rich university.

Q. Is there any opponent you've played or any situation you've been in this year that you think may equate to tomorrow's situation?

JD GRAVINA: Yeah, the closest thing would definitely be the game at the University of Iowa. That's a place where I don't know how many fans were there. I want to say 9,000 or 10,000 the day before Thanksgiving. That emotion, you really feed off of. But it can make things get away from you. So being able to experience that, and I thought it was great, we played a really good second half against Iowa. We actually outscored them in the second half. Even in the scouting report, I talked about having that mentality that we had the second half of Iowa, which was a little bit scrappier, a little more nothing-to-lose, so I think that may have helped us a little bit, especially just playing. I'm guessing there's going to be a great crowd tomorrow. We've got a good following. We're going to have 100 plus people there.

But compared to whatever 5,000 or 6,000 that might be in the arena, I'm guessing most people might be rooting against us, and that's how it was at Iowa, and I thought we really embraced that, and hopefully it will help prepare us.

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