

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Maryland vs North Carolina

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Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA
Carmichael Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels Courtney Banghart Elina Aarnisalo

Lanie Grant Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: This is the press conference for North Carolina as we preview tomorrow's second round game between UNC and Maryland.

We have with us here on stage student-athletes Elina Aarnisalo and Lanie Grant.

Q. Lanie, obviously the last month or so you've been the focal point of other defenses. You've been face guarded. What are the adjustments you've had to make, and what has the team done to help you get through that and still be effective as you have been?

LANIE GRANT: I think it's just a testament to the great guards and great teammates that I have around me that they're able to work with me through that. I think that, especially in the latter part of the season, we've kind of used that as a weapon, putting me in specific spots to make it difficult for the defense to either tag or rotate.

Just a testament to my teammates and the coaching staff.

Q. (No microphone)?

LANIE GRANT: Individually? Just moving more off the ball, finding windows, just being shot ready knowing that my windows to shoot the ball are going to be a little bit shorter because they're keyed into my shot. So just staying shot ready.

Q. Elina, I know you're one of the players with a lot of experience in this tournament. Kind of what experiences do you have from your time last year at UCLA, and then what have been the messages to your



teammates in these later rounds of the tournament?

ELINA AARNISALO: Obviously last year I made it to the Final Four. Thought a lot individually and what we need to do as a team. We've been emphasizing togetherness, just being connected, whatever it is. Enjoying every single moment off the court, enjoying ourselves, but when we're on the court, being super locked in and present.

I think that's just something we're really focusing on, staying together.

Q. For both of you, can you talk about the evolution of the backcourt chemistry since December when things were -- there were a few bumps in the road until the last few weeks, and what's been the difference?

LANIE GRANT: It's always fun playing with E. She's an amazing player. She does a great job handling the ball and getting our team ready to attack specific matchups and personnel.

Me and E workout together every single day. We're on the court together constantly. We're constantly in each other's ears, picking each other up, pushing each other. I think it's just a testament to our relationship and the relationship we have with our teammates.

ELINA AARNISALO: Exactly what she said. On the court we're a little bit different players. She can shoot really well, so it opens up different things for other guards. Just working out every day with her, it's been a lot of fun being on the court and just showing what we can do.

Q. There's a lot of old timers in here that still think of Maryland as an ACC school. You guys are pretty young. Where do you fall in understanding the history of Maryland and North Carolina, and does it mean anything to you? When did you kind of realize it?

ELINA AARNISALO: To be honest, I didn't even know Maryland was an ACC school. I'm also from Finland, so I didn't watch college sports my whole life. So yeah, pretty new to it.



LANIE GRANT: I think that in the back of my mind I did know, but I hadn't really thought about it up until this moment that Maryland did used to be an ACC team. It's kind of cool that it came around full circle like that.

Q. The other side of that is there's so many more transfers now than there used to be. How have you adapted to learning about these new rivalry games?

ELINA AARNISALO: Obviously UNC-Duke rivalry is so big, so I already knew about that before even coming here and stepping foot on campus. Obviously the NC State rivalry too. So it's just been great being a part of those big rivalries and seeing what it's like on the East Coast. Obviously it's the biggest rivalry in college sports. So it's been incredible.

Q. Elina, you nearly doubled your scoring this season, and your 3-point percentage has seen a big increase. What is it like playing in Coach Banghart's system, and how has that allowed you to be so successful this year?

ELINA AARNISALO: I think just putting in the individual work. Our whole staff is incredible, so getting my confidence up and getting my shooting percentages higher when I'm working out every day, extra shots or whatever it is.

Obviously playing for CB, she wants me to be aggressive, do my thing, show my strengths. That obviously allows me to do it on offense, and my teammates allow me to do my thing, and they really push me to take shots, be aggressive, whatever it is the team needs me to do.

Q. Elina, Coach Banghart has talked about how you're such a nice person, and she wants you to be meaner on the court. What have those conversations been like? Has that changed your mentality on the court?

ELINA AARNISALO: Yeah, I guess I am a nice person off the court. I hope I'm also a nice person on the court. I think like I've always been competitive, but it's like shown in different ways. I'm not the trash talker on the court. I've just kind of learned to celebrate my own scores too in the last couple games.

I think it's just showing emotion on the court, that's one of the things. And just being aggressive and more physical, all those things, but just like showing the emotion and the competitiveness that I have in my myself.

Q. So you made it to the Final Four last year, and you've got that NCAA experience. Have you been able to share those experiences with your teammates? Also, you were part of a blowout win at Maryland last

year. So you've obviously seen Maryland before.

ELINA AARNISALO: Obviously being at the Final Four taught a lot to our whole team at UCLA last year and individually. What I've talked with our team, just being together, enjoying every single moment, being present, and just locking in. It's March. You've got to do like every little detail the right way. You've got to focus on everything. Like there's no missed possessions. We've just got to be together in it all the way.

Q. You'll see a guard you saw a few times last season, including the Sweet 16. What are the challenges that she's going to bring and just the overall challenges Maryland will bring for you?

LANIE GRANT: Obviously we're pretty familiar with her since she transferred from our conference to Maryland. She's a dynamic player. We know that going in. She's had a great season thus far. We're just going to be keyed into trying to limit her, trying to limit what she wants to do, but we're excited for the matchup.

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined on stage by UNC Coach Courtney Banghart.

Q. Yesterday you mentioned, I think, the Final Four 20 years ago. Were you at that game?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yes.

Q. What do you recall about that?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I was a young assistant from the northeast. I was an assistant at Dartmouth at the time. I was still figuring out as a graduate student, I was still figuring out if coaching was going to be a vocation for me or whatnot. That was old school ACC. It hasn't been in Boston since. That was kind of fun for me to have a lot of friends in Boston too.

I just remember the energy around women's basketball in a league that I knew and in an area that I knew really well. It was into the business.

Q. Having a guard like Elina Aarnisalo, what is her experience in past March Madness runs meant to this one this year?

COURTNEY BANGHART: You know I don't know. E's really grown up a lot. I think when you -- I think the undertold story of the transfer process is you have to learn a whole new language. You have to learn a whole new system and standard and expectation. So she spent some time adjusting to that.



At UCLA, she wasn't asked to do as much as we're asking her to do, right? She was kind of feed Lauren Betts, right? They had that kind of big post in the middle of the floor, and they were running a lot of actions for her, whereas we want her to be more aggressive. I trust her with the ball in her hands. I know she can be a hard matchup, and she's got great vision.

So as a player, her role is different, right? In terms of the NCAA Tournament, her role is different, like we're relying on her more than they were.

Obviously Nyla Harris played in an elite 8. Indya's hosted before. The neat thing about college athletics is every year there's a lot of difference. Even before the transfer portal, every year is a little different. I think it's as much, even more so, with this team and the stuff they've been through and who they are as a unit, maybe more so than the experiences they've had before it.

Q. As I asked Elina about, your conversations with her, warning her to be meaner, can you kind of talk about that? Have you seen a transformation from her during the season of being maybe a little meaner on the court or aggressive?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, she worded it really well. I've had really high standards for Elina. I knew how good she could be. I recruited her really hard out of Europe, and out of the portal recruiting her hard and making sure that she knew we're going to play to your strengths, and part of that is going to be we're going to figure it out as we go because you're such a creative and talented player.

Then she got here, and again, the language is the thing. It's not her first language. She might know exactly what she's trying to say in our play call, but she needs a second to register how to say it in English. So I think there was some delay. And then I think still learning the holistic part of our program in terms of what our people's strengths were, and yet I kept imploring her to be aggressive.

So it took time. And I wanted her -- I think teams take on the personalities of their leaders, both their coaching staff and of their best players. I wanted her to show how competitive she is more outwardly. I wanted her to play with more passion because that helps the rest of the team feel more connected to what she's doing.

So I think you're starting to see, even yesterday when she hit that shot and got fouled, you got to see that kind of flex, right? That means a lot from a kid that is more gentle by nature.

Her and I, our relationship has been really strong. I've absolutely loved coaching her. I think she has really enjoyed being here, and her maturation as a player, I have great pride in and also just great excitement for her because I think she's scratching the surface still of how good she can be.

Q. I've gotten to talk with some of the girls this week about the Blue Ballers account on TikTok. Jordan said you're a fan. Are you a follower? Do you support it? How do you feel about that page?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I don't -- if I follow it, that would be -- I think I do. I'm not as good at TikTok as our players are. But in this day and age, branding is an important thing. The more audience you can bring to their accounts, the more they can bring in in true NIL value, right?

So I do have a TikTok account, off the court, for all of you followers out there, in part because my following helps them in their own way.

They started this Blue Baller account that kind of doesn't have to go through the university formalities, and so they really do get to show their personalities in the way that it works. I don't know how many followers they have. I think we'd all be surprised at how many and how much viewership they have. I know our recruits are commenting sometimes. I'm like, oh, my gosh.

The fact that we don't get to okay the content is always scary, but they're fun hearted, and they're them. I don't know how to answer that besides anything that helps them get true NIL, I'm all in for.

Q. Brenda talked earlier about coming back to North Carolina from her Maryland days. You heard me ask the players, they don't really understand it. Do you bring it up? Is it important at all or not a factor or what?

COURTNEY BANGHART: No, I don't think -- they know they have to be -- sort of when we talk about conference realignments and people ask, how do you feel about it? I feel that the people that are paid to make that decision had better make the right one, whatever that is.

I have to beat whoever's on my schedule, whether they're in the ACC or the Big Ten or the SEC or the Big 12 or the Ohio Valley, it doesn't matter.

I know it sounds crazy, but sometimes these kids are so focused on what's ahead and on themselves, that they don't -- the history is just a little bit lost on them. I think for them it's about who we are right now and who we have to

beat right in front of us.

Q. Just kind of a piggy-back on the Elina answer. She mentioned togetherness and playing together, being together. She kind of talked to me a little bit about it in the locker room. What does that mean in the program, and how do you see the players playing together, acting together, and just being together as a team?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I hope we recruit it, but I think sometimes you have to get lucky. I think these guys are really connected. They care so much about the Carolina across their chest that they're less concerned with their own individual this, that, or the other thing. They really do celebrate each other's success.

So I think we emphasize it and celebrate it in the right way, but they really bought into it. I also think, when you watch us play, right, there's an element of resilience that we've had to show this year. We lost 3 of our first 5 ACC games. That's not a great start, which basically means you had to win every single game you play for the next two months, and they were just resilient through that.

The connectedness they showed after we lost to Notre Dame, the practice was no different than it was as if we'd won. These guys continually lean into the process because they're connected to the mission, not just when things go well. We always say, when you set goals, you set them irregardless of obstacle. There were some obstacles that this particular team had to get through, and they stayed connected, both as an individual on their journey and then as a group.

So you see it in how they play, how they celebrate each other, how they lift each other up. You can see it in their answers. I think that's what's another thing that's great about March Madness, you put a microphone in front of them, and you have really talented reporters who know kind of how to ask a question that could get at the truth, and they shine. That's -- you can't really prepare for the questions you guys might ask them, but you can tell that they care about their resilience and their connectedness, both in how they play and how they prepare.

Q. Can you talk about the evolution of Lanie's game from becoming a player that other teams are putting a lot of focus on to having to deal with that, and what adjustments has she made since then, and what has the team kind of done to help her through that?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I love talking about Lanie because we have to remember last year when she skipped her senior year of high school to join our program, she was playing on a team that had so many fifth year seniors, and

she was 18. That's a huge age gap, 22-year-olds and 18-year-olds, in a locker room where she hadn't yet lived away from home, and she's not only living away from home, but she had an important role on last year's team as such a young player.

Then wanted to take a, we call it Lanie 2.0. You don't get to go to your second year here and not get better. You have to get better in order for this to really work. So she went from being kind of a shooter to now a scorer. She went from being a team defender to a lockdown individual defender as well.

She's just made incredible progress, where she's reliable. I think she led us in minutes this year, I'm not sure, but it feels like it because she is so reliable on both ends of the floor.

Then when teams really key on her, which they started to do, as you know, part way through the ACC season, almost halfway through, we were able to use her in ways that got everybody else layups, as you probably remember from the Virginia Tech ACC Tournament game, or the Virginia on the road, if you're going to defend Lanie a certain way, you're going to get something else, just like if you defend Elina a certain way or our posts a certain way.

Last night they were really collapsing and protecting the paint, so they were really concerned about our interior game, and we shot up 40 3s. We're going to take what the defense gives us, and we're going to make them wrong basically, that's our goal. Part of that is how they deal with Lanie.

She watches a ton of film. We've already watched a lot of film this morning, and she's stayed a student of the game, but she's never lost the confidence on who she is. She has believed in herself from the very beginning. She's believed in me from the very beginning. I obviously offered her when she hadn't even entered high school yet, so I believed in her early on, and she just proves me right every single day.

I look forward to her continually progressing. I think Lanie 3.0 will be even better.

Q. Both UNC and Maryland yesterday had pretty sizable rebounding advantages. How do you see that aspect of the game playing out tomorrow and the importance of it?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I would love to say that we're going to have a very sizable rebounding advantage against Maryland. I don't know if that's the case. These guys are elite on the glass. Part of that is they put a lot of pressure

on the rim off the dribble. When they do that, you're forced into pursuit rebounding at times, maybe not as much positional. So we've got to handle that problem.

Also, they've got hungry rebounders. They've got guys that are really -- they pride themselves on that first, second, and third step, and their first, second, and third jump. So if we area rebound instead of pursuit and contact rebound, it's not going to go well, for either team because we're a problem on the glass as well.

That's what you get when you're down to the round of 32, a physicality and an identity that is laced with toughness. There's just not a lot of just pretty teams. There's pretty and gritty at this point, right? And there's a grittiness factor to tomorrow's game that both teams have to bring on the glass. I'm sure we're both imploring it, talking about it, adjusting for it, but there's an element of, when that ball gets tipped, we've got to get to the glass, both sides.

Q. You're slotted for the noon game tomorrow. Would this be your ideal timing for a basketball game, or would you like it a little bit later in the day?

COURTNEY BANGHART: I like any game time that we win quite frankly. We had a lot of noon tips this year. I think the -- I don't know if our students will be back in time for that, so that's a bit of a bummer. Also, I know there's a lot of youth sports. My own children have them as well. Maybe if it was a little bit later, that might help the crowd a little bit. I'm not sure.

You're also, especially at this time, the later the game is, the more you're just kind of watching basketball all day, kind of like drunk watching basketball. Then you're like, oh, God, we have to play. So there's something about a noon tip which then every game after us they're talking about the teams that have already stamped their card into the Sweet 16.

So I started this morning with breakfast, like, hey, we could be the first team to stamp our spot into the Sweet 16. If we win the game, it was the perfect time.

Q. Okananwa, obviously you've seen her a lot. She's a big reason Duke went into the Sweet 16 last year. What are the challenges that she gives you?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Her motor, Oluchi is an easy kid to root for because a lot is toughness, resilience, and motor, a lot like Alyssa Ustby. There's a lot of Alyssa in her in her relentlessness. Sometimes people think that that's just something everybody can do, it's a skill.

Like so where she might lack skill in certain other areas,

she has an elite skill in how she competes, and it's hard to guard that. It's hard to guard somebody that winning -- winning plays, offensive rebounds, creating free-throw attempts, getting out in transition, some of these things that you'll show a clip of somebody else, and she just finds her way into the clip. You're not supposed to be in this one. I'm working on this.

She's just a kid that you have to account for because of her skill, which is her motor and her resilience and her toughness and her relentlessness. Yeah, that's an absolutely huge part of her game. It was a huge part of her game in the ACC. It was a huge part of her game in the Big Ten.

Relentlessness travels across school lines apparently. Yeah, we have great respect for her. Easy to root for her. We have a kid just like her on our roster, and we know just how much that brings to your team.

Q. What kind of game do you expect as far as pace? And does Maryland remind you of any teams you've played this season in that regard?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Like the Big Ten and the ACC, they've had to play lots of different ways. They've had to play against the press of Ohio State. They've had to play against kind of a more -- you know how Michigan State plays versus how Oregon plays versus how Michigan plays with their guard play, and they've got bigger guards.

They've played a variety of ways. Just like if you watch Virginia, Virginia Tech, Duke -- I'm thinking of who we've played recently, Louisville. We've had to play a little bit of different ways too. There's a little element of what are their strengths and what are our strengths? But there's also an element of, when that ball is tipped, there's going to be some adjustments that's both sides have to make, right?

They're like a lot of teams we've played because they're deep in terms of they've got all of their guys are dangerous. There's not a guy you can just not worry about, but also they play both sides of the ball. Obviously I think we do as well.

I think it's more just -- there's not one team that they look like. It's kind of a collection of teams that we've had to deal with, whether that's they can throw a little bit of switching man to man and fronting the post, or they can get into some flat coverage, or they can extend the floor. It kind of takes bits and pieces of our journey sort of in the prep mode.

That's what you expect from good teams. There's very few teams in the country that just, this is what we do no matter

who we play. I think everyone else, we just have to continually play to our strengths and find ways to pick on the other team's weaknesses, and they don't always match up each possession. So you have to do it kind of holistically.

Kind of a long way of saying there's not one way to beat Maryland. There's not one way to beat Carolina. We have to continually possession by possession win one possession at a time, and so do they.

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