

# 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 Coach Courtney Banghart Elina Aarnisalo

## Lanie Grant

### Media Conference

North Carolina 74, Maryland 66

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. This is the press conference for the North Carolina Tarheels following today's NCAA Division 1 women's basketball second round contest.

We have with us here on stage Head Coach Courtney Banghart as well as student-athletes Elina Aarnisalo and Lanie Grant.

Coach, congratulations, and if you'll start us with an opening statement.

COURTNEY BANGHART: First off, I have such great respect for what Brenda's done with the program year after year. What an honor and how fun to bring the Maryland/Carolina rivalry back to Carmichael. I thought our Carmichael crowd showed out for it.

It was a great environment. You can tell how loved this team is. It's hard to do after you lose the familiarity of the fifth year seniors we had last year. We needed them to learn a lot of new faces because we had a couple freshmen come in, only two transfers.

We're a young team, and there's a lot of trust in that locker room. Going to a Sweet 16 is so hard. I know it's harder than is even put into words. These guys embraced hard this whole year. I was hard on them. I couldn't be prouder of them. I couldn't be more grateful to the Carolina community for wrapping their arms around my team and these two.



What do you say about these two? They're complete warriors. We had to play a different way. We love to share the ball and space you out and beat you on the inside and attack you from the arc. This team really wanted you go 1 v. 1 win and wanted you to win your match-up.

I kept imploring them to win their match-up. They're so unselfish, they're looking for the next pass. I told them don't get bored at doing the thing that will help you win the basketball game. A little out of character, but they kept going.

Proud of you two, proud of our seniors and the Carolina community and this whole program. Yeah, go Heels.

**Q. Elina, you had a lot of success driving to the hoop. Was there something in the scout that you saw that allowed you to do that so much? How did you deal with playing in foul trouble for so long?**

ELINA AARNISALO: Their defensive style gave us an opportunity to attack the paint and go one on one against them. There were times Lanie and I had the ball and saw the paint empty and it's go time at that point.

What was the other question? Oh, foul trouble. Yeah, I did have four fouls. Obviously, it affected the rebounding and boxing out. This was a very physical game. They crashed the boards really hard. So just had to be a little more careful in that.

**Q. Lanie, you guys led by 11 at one point in the first half. Maryland takes the lead in the beginning of the fourth quarter. How did you keep your poise and end the game on a strong run to win this one?**

LANIE GRANT: We knew it would be a dog fight throughout the entire time. So even though we were up by double digits, we knew we couldn't let up. They gave us a good run, and we kind of just did a good job of absorbing that and not panicking, not trying to do too much, not getting away from the game plan.

I think they tied it back up at one point. We looked at each other and said let's get back to what we were doing in the



first half. Let's keep leaning on each other. The biggest thing was getting stops and securing rebounds.

**Q. To always be known as a 3-point shooter, but now you are so comfortable going to the hole one on one. Can you speak to your comfort level in that evolution?**

LANIE GRANT: Yeah. Obviously, like E said, we knew in this particular game that the lane was going to be pretty open. Like E said and like Coach said, if there's an open block, go take it. Teams started doing a really good job of getting out in the arc, contesting my 3-point shot. Maryland did a great job of taking that away so I had to move to the next option.

It's a testament to my position coaches and my teammates, who pour confidence into me. I always have the ability to get to the rim, but I don't always need to. This game, there was kind of a need, and Coach made it clear she wanted me to win the paint a little bit more.

**Q. Elina, yesterday we were joking about how you need to play meaner. You looked pretty ferocious out there. If you could comment on that and then, Lanie, if you could comment on the same thing about her.**

ELINA AARNISALO: Yeah. We were playing to win. We don't want to go home so we have to be mean on the court. Obviously, it's fun. It's fun to win and hit some shots. We can also enjoy and have fun on the court. Saw a lot of smiles from all of us. But yeah, I had to be mean, I guess.

LANIE GRANT: I would say in March, there's kind of an urgency where you know that there's no other option but to win. So I think that there's just a little bit of that, along with -- I mean, E is one of the most competitive kids that I know. No matter what she's doing, she's going to do it to win. She might be a little slow to show outward emotion. When she does, she's a dog.

**Q. For both of you, could you speak to the leadership of Indya and Nyla Harris throughout that kind of fourth quarter there and also, like, what was the message going into the fourth quarter, and what was the mindset you approached that with?**

LANIE GRANT: Harris got on me at the end of the third quarter. She told me I need to make my lay-ups. So I said okay, I'll make my lay-ups. They do a good job of pushing hard in the moment. Also really uplifting, the first ones to celebrate everybody. That's every game with them.

I wouldn't say they even did anything different. They've been so consistent with their leadership this year. That's why it's so easy to rely on them. Indy does a good job.

She's the first one in the floor at every possession. She's always going to be going after rebounds. She's putting her body on the line every single play.

There's no option but to continue to rise to her level, and she and Harris both showcased that today.

ELINA AARNISALO: I agree with everything Lanie said. We can trust them. Every single day, they're going to show up and do what they always do. The little things in huddles, taking a deep breath, sticking together and trusting everything we do together so we're going to win.

**Q. For both of you, the crucial stretch where you had Nyla's 3-pointer and then Lanie, your lay-up back-to-back there. What did you think was the impact on that late in the game, and what does it say about the youth of the team stepping up for you in the clutch?**

ELINA AARNISALO: I guess because we are very youthful. We don't maybe feel as much pressure and we're free to shoot those shots. Nyla Brooks has been shooting those 3s all season. She's not afraid to take any shots. She always says money always good, as it is for her. Those were obviously important baskets that we made.

LANIE GRANT: I think Nyla Brooks probably hit the biggest shot of her entire collegiate career in this game. There wasn't a single doubt from anybody that the ball wasn't going to go in. I looked at her after the game and said, who did you feel like? She said, I felt like myself. I said, I know that's right.

She's always going to shoot that shot. Nine times out of ten, it's going to go in. We believe in her, and she has the freedom and the green light to shoot that shot. I'm proud of her. That's a freshman -- at this point, you don't really consider her a freshman, but that's a freshman playing really big minutes down the stretch for us and playing really solid defensive minutes on the other team's best player. She made it difficult for her. Super proud of her. I guess just make plays at the end of the game, but yeah.

**Q. I know your coach thinks about it a bit, but how much do you all think about ACC pride, playing against teams not in our conference?**

LANIE GRANT: It's always so fun. This tournament, I root for all the ACC teams. Even though we compete super hard against each other in conference, once we get to March Madness, I root for the ACC teams in every single game. There was a sense of we want to represent the conference well. We want to do right by them.

ELINA AARNISALO: We want to represent ACC. We're always hoping all the ACC teams do good. Last night, we were joking with the team that we should make an ACC group chat with all the players of all the teams and encourage each other. Yeah, it's really important.

**Q. For most of the game, there was only two bigs, and a lot of that dynamic was Brooks playing a lot. What made that chemistry work with only one big for most of the game?**

LANIE GRANT: I think the great thing about this team is we're able to play different lineups well. So depending on what team we're playing and what we need, anybody is able to step up. This time around, they were really staying out on our shooters so having Brooks in to spread the floor a little bit, it allowed me and E to get to the rim more.

Brooks has proved herself. She's stepped up time and time again. She's gotten so much better on the defensive end and on the offensive end. She's ready for the big moments.

Next game, we could have a completely different core group that's playing big minutes. So that's what's so beautiful about this team and this program.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thanks so much. Congratulations on the win.

We'll now take questions for Coach.

**Q. Courtney, I'll ask you the same question I asked Lanie. When Maryland took the lead early in the fourth quarter, how did you keep your poise and end the game on the strong run you did?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: Piggyback on Debbie's question, give a lot of credit to the ACC. We've been in battles all year long. My family always comes home and says I can't do this anymore. I can't. It's too stressful. That's every game for us it's not uncharted territory.

I got to the point where I was praying that Oluchi would make her free throws because I didn't want to have to rebound it, right? So we basically knew on the offensive end we had to take care of our possessions. I kept imploring them, honestly, it's so against our style. Spread them out and take your guy.

They just kept doing it. They had to go to things that I said before in the scout, let's make -- we like making people do what they don't like to do, right? Maryland doesn't zone much, right? We got to the zone at half, I was like yeah, now they've done what they don't want to do.

We just had to stay aggressive. But you don't go this long into the season and not trust your guys. These are close games. We know they're going to be. We're prepared for it. I trust them.

**Q. With the game being tied going into the fourth, what did you tell them? We asked the players what they said to each other. What was your message?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: I'd be interested what they said. I was imploring them to keep one on the ball so that we could rebound. And so that was what I was trying to say on the defensive end. We're letting right drivers go right. There's physicality on the glass. We're not meeting it early enough.

On the offensive end, I kept reminding them, especially in the press, you have to make one or two guard you before you make your next play. We were picking it up and looking for the next pass, which didn't get us to this point. I reminded them, if no one is guarding you, find someone to guard you and go by them.

We wanted to stay spaced and spread them out. Keep them confident, keep them loose. I like their shots. I'm picky, but I know when I look back, I'll like the shots. We missed a few too many lay-ups. I felt our game plan was solid, and we didn't have to change it.

**Q. Piggybacking off those two questions, what were you seeing from your team down the stretch in the fourth quarter, especially the leaders, Nyla Harris and Indya Nivar?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: Indya gives you confidence. I always say when you want to judge a leader check how much they're winning, right? Like Indya has found a way to win with this team, she and Nyla Harris.

In time-outs, I say take us home, right? That inspires her to stay doing what she's been doing, right, which is ensure we're locked down on the defensive end, keep pouring the game plan, reminding of the game plan on the defensive end. On the offensive end, understand our attack and keep doing it.

I kept telling them, don't get bored. It might be shimmy, it might be a cross, it might be an in-out, it might be a slow to fast, but you'll win your match-up. That will open up yourself or somebody else. We don't need to run a ton of actions. Usually, we have good action stuff.

Those two seniors have found a way to get to a Sweet 16 in their senior year. That's their leadership. They're

winners.

**Q. Coach, I'm interested to hear you say take those one-on-one match-ups. Maryland does have premiere defenders. What did you see that made you think that was the best plan of attack for you?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: I thought that a lot of teams that play us are worried about our inside game. They were willing to give up the inside game and not deal with our 3s so they hugged the arc a little bit like Duke, right?

So they force you to finish at the rim. I feel like our guards, especially our kind of top three guys that get a lot of minutes, they're hard to guard in space. So I watched the last 16 games that Maryland played just to make sure that that was really what they're going to do. They just kept allowing or requiring some 1 v. 1 attack.

With Oluchi, we wanted to use her athleticism to our advantage. We wanted her closer to us to go by her. We wanted her to be slow to fast. The other guys we wanted to make them be shifty. We wanted Garzon and Addi Mack to have to move their hips.

Interestingly, which we haven't done all year, we tried to implore on them how to beat the guy in front of them, right? And I kept telling them, if there's help, pass. But there's not going to be. They just couldn't believe it. Then you saw we got three straight lay-ups for E to start the game and they started to believe it.

**Q. You touched on this already a little bit, but was there a game earlier in the year that gave you the confidence you could employ this type of game plan?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: I think Duke gives you confidence because they're big and physical on the glass, and then they also guard the arc. They don't let you beat you from there. So you kind of have to punish them with 2s. And that means every possession's more valuable because, obviously, the math on that is that 3s will get you quicker to the higher number.

Then, obviously, offensively, they're balanced so we have to be balanced just like Duke. But really, I mean, I've sat in this chair I don't know how many times at Princeton, and you just get met with the physicality and you're like oh, God. The ACC has prepared us for this physicality. They've prepared us for individual defenders and really good coaches. I feel more prepared, honestly, year after year as our league continues to get better.

**Q. Can you talk about the flexibility that Brooks gives you, giving you the ability to play only one big for a lot**

**of the time. She did so many things. Also, when she took that shot early in the shot clock, was that a little too soon? Was that one of those you wondered about and said yeah?**

COURTNEY BANGHART: I'll start with the shot, right? I think you've got to go with what you see day after day, right? The kid pours so much into it, and what makes her so good is she believes in herself. So I'm not going to be the one to put any doubt in that kid's head, right? I'm just not going to do it.

She knows that, as she says, money's always good. I tell her that before she goes into the game. I say, money's always good, right? She says, you're right. I love her growth on the defensive end. She's much better on the defensive end. Her ball handling has gotten better this season. That's hard to do as a freshman because you're so worked up on the other stuff.

She played vertically. She wasn't elite on the defensive end. She was really good as a freshman and will continue to get even better. She gives us a ton of flexibility. Laila Hull gave us great minutes.

I felt when we had our double big in, they were crowding the paint more. I wanted to space them out and make them get out of the coverage and they stayed in it so we stayed in it too.

**Q. Asking similar question as I did to the players, you talked about the youth of the team and maybe some folks on the outside thinking this might be a rebuilding year for you guys. Again, what does it say about the team, the way the young players were able to step up throughout the game and especially down the stretch.**

COURTNEY BANGHART: There are so many different ways to build your team. I think the story that gets told the most is interestingly through the general manager route, right? The teams that have all the transfers, right?

The story that gets told the least is the coaches that trust their recruiting and develop their players, right? We only had two kids on our roster that were transfers, right, this year that hadn't been with us the year before. That was obviously Nyla Harris and Elina. Everybody else is ones we trusted in the recruiting process and developed throughout the year.

That's a good story that I think gets under told. We're the seventh youngest Power 4 team in the country. We had a lot of ground to make up. Takes a special group of leaders and people in that locker room to make up that much ground.



We were not good in June. We film every -- I almost had them redo this whole gym because there wasn't a camera in it. We film everything. I can barely do anything without film. We showed them every day the stuff they were doing wrong and the stuff they were doing right. The right section was small. I said try to grow that section.

It takes a special group to make up as much ground as they've made. I'm proud of our recruiting. I'm really proud of our development to put us in this position. You're right. Especially when you take Reniya Kelly out of the mix, that's over 75 percent of your offense and defense you lost from a year ago. And here we are going to another Sweet 16.

**Q. You had as many starters in foul trouble as you made 3-pointers. If somebody told you that before the game, you probably would have cringed. How were you able to navigate the foul trouble? I know the lack of 3s is part of the strategy.**

COURTNEY BANGHART: We were able to navigate it with our depth. I had to switch it a little bit and keep one on the ball. I'm sure there are plenty of coaches that are in the stands questioning certain things, but sometimes what's happening in the game is beyond what the average fan thinks.

We had to sort of give certain things up to not foul in certain areas. I give it to our depth. As I told Indya, it's really fitting she fouled out of her last game at Carmichael because she didn't leave anything on the floor, right? She took it all with her.

That kid, what she's meant to us defensively and as a leader, you can't say she left anything. She left it all out there.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time. Congratulations on the win.

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