

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Creighton vs UCLA

Sunday, March 24, 2024
Los Angeles, California, USA
Pauley Pavilion

Creighton Bluejays
Jim Flanery

Morgan Maly

Mallory Brake

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're going to go ahead and get started. We're joined by Creighton head coach Jim Flanery and student-athletes Morgan Maly and Mallory Brake.

We'll get started with an opening statement from Coach Flanery followed by questions in the room and on zoom for the student-athletes.

JIM FLANERY: Thanks, Michael. We have a huge opportunity and a huge challenge tomorrow evening. UCLA's a really good team. I watched them early in the year a couple times and was super impressed with them.

Then as you get busy in your conference season, you see a little bit less of them. But they've got pretty much everything you need to be a great team.

But I'd like to think that we do too. I think yesterday I thought we really clicked as a team. I thought we played like a mature group, and we handled the moment, which I think is really important in an NCAA Tournament because you can be a good team and fall flat in an NCAA Tournament game if you don't kind of have the right approach and you're not connected and willing to help each other out. Because everybody's nervous, they're a little more nervous. I thought we got through some of those nerves early and played really well.

Like I said, we're thrilled for the opportunity tomorrow night and to get to stay a little bit longer in Los Angeles because the weather, I think, is a little better than it is in Omaha. But we know what a challenge we have.

And way less prep time. I think that's the thing that, when



you get your assignment on Sunday, you've got all week, when you don't play till Saturday, to get ready for that first opponent, and then it's a quick turnaround.

We won't be as detailed, but on the other hand, they probably won't be either.

Q. If Lauren Betts is able to play for UCLA, what kind of challenge does that present? I know -- she's 6'7". I think that's six inches taller than anyone on your roster roughly. So what kind of challenges would that present? I'm sure you've played against players her height previous to this season, but what kind of challenges have you seen watching her on film and how would you go about counteracting her if she's able to play?

MORGAN MALY: You just try to push her out as far away from the basket as possible. I think there's not a ton you can do once she does get the ball.

So I think trying to get her uncomfortable and then also maybe trying to have the guards surround once she does get the ball and try to get touches tied up. We'll see.

MALLORY BRAKE: Yeah, if she plays tomorrow night, I think it's obviously going to impact the game for us, but we just talked about even today being physical with all their bigs, kind of relying on our fundamentals and guards to peel back and help us inside.

Q. Morgan, you've talked a little bit earlier this season about you and Emma being extremely competitive in practices. Have you seen a different level of aggression from her this past week or a different demeanor from her?

MORGAN MALY: I think she's kind of been trying to get it going in practice, and I think everyone on our team has been aware of that. So it was just really good to see her stick with that mentality throughout the game. I don't think she scored the first half, and then she dropped 16 in the third.

She's an awesome player, and I'm just glad that her



mentality didn't change even when the ball maybe didn't fall at the beginning of the game.

Q. You have a unique aspect of having five senior starters. I don't know how many teams in the country have that, but how does that work to your advantage? Obviously you're a veteran team that's very smart and together and does lots of good things. How does that help you, especially this time of year?

MORGAN MALY: I think that's what you lean on when you get to the tournament. I think, as the season progressed, we had a lot of close games where I feel like we could lean on each other in our maturity, and we used that to win close games at the end of the year.

Especially, I'm sure the gym will be packed tomorrow, just leaning on each other knowing that we've been here before and that we can do it. I think us being the more connected team is going to help us win the game tomorrow.

MALLORY BRAKE: Yeah, obviously nerves arise in games like this and postseason, but being a veteran group and playing together for so long and this being our third NCAA postseason has been a little bit comforting in that sense.

So it's nice looking in the eyes of girls who you've played with for four years, and starting with such a vet group helps some of those girls coming off the bench who maybe it's their first NCAA or second time playing or whatever.

It kind of gives the top-to-bottom roster reassurance that we've been here before and that we can play with anybody.

Q. Is UCLA similar to any teams that you've faced this year? Then also, how much did the experience going into Iowa two years ago help in terms of coming into a situation like this weekend and UCLA and going through it before?

MALLORY BRAKE: I think the only similarity that I can really speak on right now is that the intimidation factor that nobody expected us to win at Iowa and we did. So we're not scared of the matchup tomorrow. We're excited, and we're grateful to be in this situation.

Like Molly said today in practice before we got going, every day is a bonus day to this point. We've kind of been in a similar situation, so we're not turned down from this opportunity.

MORGAN MALY: I honestly don't watch a ton of women's basketball throughout the year, so I don't know. Today was my first time watching UCLA on film.

I think like physicality-wise and size-wise, we haven't matched up with anyone as big as them this year. But, yeah, what Mal said about coming in here, we're not scared.

Q. Mal, over the course of the season, you've gotten a lot more comfortable in the flow of the offense, finding your spots yesterday. It felt like you were really getting into a rhythm on that low block, finding a lot of offensive rebounds. Can you talk about how you've grown as an offensive player this year. Obviously your defense has come a long way as well.

MALLORY BRAKE: At some point, I think honestly it was the Xavier game that was kind of a turning point that we discovered that I kind of get in a little bit better rhythm for everybody on offense to kind of hang out a little bit lower, kind of position myself to get the O boards and whatnot and get my teammates open.

Yeah, I've definitely gotten in a little bit more of a groove, and my coaches have helped me with that. But it's been interesting to see what works because obviously I'm a different offensive player for us in that starting group, but we've kind of worked through some kinks. It's been good.

I feel like yesterday too I kind of got in rhythm early, which was nice. Definitely offensive rebounding has helped me as well to find my offensive rhythm.

Q. Morgan, yesterday you were getting a lot of wide open shots that you normally don't get a single look at. What was it like to see that you were getting the ball with nobody around you a few times?

MORGAN MALY: Yeah, I'm not used to that, so that was good. I think we did a really good job of pushing in transition yesterday and converting on our two-on-one opportunities. And also when they were trying to switch it up between like man and zone, I think we did an okay job of moving the ball, but there's still space there. So I'm shooting that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you both.

We're going to open it up to questions for Coach Flanery.

Q. Similar question, do you expect Lauren -- I know you're not privy to their injury report, so you don't have a Crystal ball, but do you expect Lauren to play? If so, how will you go about counteracting her size?

JIM FLANERY: We expect her to play. I think you have to prepare as if she's going to play, and if she doesn't play,

you adjust that way. I'd rather prepare as if she's playing because I know what a factor she is.

Like I said, I watched them quite a bit early in the season and was really impressed with how quickly they kind of integrated her because UCLA had a lot back from last year. So to put somebody who's that talented in and get in a rhythm at the rate that they did, I thought was pretty darn impressive.

But, yeah, we've got to be physical before she catches the ball. That's the thing. If she catches it too deep, we don't have a chance. So you've got to -- legally- you've got to be as physical as you can to get her off her spot.

She doesn't have as strong a base -- like you watch her against Pili from Utah, there's a probably seven-inch size difference, but there's also a strength difference that Pili has that Lauren doesn't have, so the physicality piece.

We're going rotate defenders on her. We're not going to try to assume -- and she's only -- when healthy, she's been a 25, 26-minute a game player. So I'm not expecting her to be on the floor for probably more than that based on she didn't play yesterday. But we will prepare -- have prepared as if she's going to play.

Like I said, we're going to do -- there will be some lineups where we can give more help that they'll put out there, and there will be some lineups they put out there where the help isn't going to be as available because they're going to have a better spacing team because they're going to shoot it better at the positions pretty much across the board, which was part of our problem yesterday. You know, UNLV shoots it, every one of those kids, except the kid who was posting, can make threes.

So when they put kids out there who aren't necessarily floor spacers, we'll be able to crowd more. I think we have to have good lineup recognition, which I think is something that an older team can do more than some.

Q. Kind of following up on that, how did you think Gabriela Jaquez did in her place yesterday, and how did they look different with her on the floor?

JIM FLANERY: Yeah, she played great. She and Kiki were the keys for them early. Osborne got going in the second half, but those two kind of carried them through the first quarter and a half.

She just plays hard. She's what I would call a blender, like she's not -- I mean, she was more of a focal point of what they tried to do last night, but normally she's out there to guard, energy plays. They posted her probably more last

night than they normally would, which is something that we'll have to be prepared for.

Yeah, I mean, you watch her play, you admire just how hard she plays and what her motor is.

Q. Coach, there have been plays this season where you've struggled to break a press, and yesterday --

JIM FLANERY: Thanks for pointing that out.

Q. -- you did a really good job -- you were able to get the ball in deep. How did you do that yesterday, and how do you continue that into tomorrow's matchup and beyond?

JIM FLANERY: Yeah, I guess you could say we worked on it a little bit more the last two, three weeks because we did hit some speed bumps in terms of backcourt, ball security the last -- when you look at our turnover numbers, they're low on the season, but I think you're also right in saying we've struggled against pressure late in games when teams are trying to catch up.

I just think part of that is I've probably under coached it because you think, well, we start five seniors. We should be able to break -- we've worked on it enough, we should be able to break a press. But I think the results we've had for a while would indicate we needed to work on it more, so we have.

We've put people in the right spots. Sometimes it's not what you run, it's who you put where. That's where Emma is such a value to us because she's a bigger ball handler, so she's a great receiver and a great decision-maker whereas you look at -- Molly's -- I know we list here at 5'7", but she's 5'6". She's medium speed. Lauren is a smaller medium speed quick target. So just putting people in the right spots, I think is important.

We knew they'd press us some. Yeah, that's going to be important tomorrow because, whether they zone press or just pick us up, we're going to have to make sure we handle their pressure, and I would expect early pressure even though I thought -- you know, they had to work to win last night. Osborne played 39 minutes. I can't remember what Kiki's minutes were, but they were pretty high too.

The score didn't indicate how competitive that game was. I think UCLA's a reasonably deep team, but we'll see what kind of sustained pressure we see. But we'll be ready for it.

Q. Jim, is UCLA similar to any team that you faced this year or any Big East squad?

JIM FLANERY: The obvious answer would be UConn. I wouldn't say that there are that many parallels, but from a talent standpoint across the board, I think UConn is the -- UConn is the best team we've played. So I think from a talent standpoint.

Edwards, Aaliyah Edwards is a different type of player than Lauren Betts, but they're both elite post players. Bueckers is as good as any elite player in the country maybe other than probably Caitlin. I would say that's probably the biggest comp or the closest comp. It's still a little bit different.

I also think -- here's the thing. UConn has played us two or three -- two times a year, and so their familiarity with our offense is different than what I'm hoping UCLA's familiarity is with our offense. I think that's kind of what we bank on in postseason is that we play differently offensively than a lot of teams. If we're really good at what we do and you haven't played against us, then we have a chance.

And yesterday we were really good at what we did. We made 15 threes. But we can still be really good without making 15 threes if we do what we do. So that's going to be a key.

You always think that using your bench too is going to be important, I think, to stay fresh. We can't stand around and win the game tomorrow. We can't go get a shot against their size and athleticism. We've got to move the ball and move bodies. So that's going to require that we stay as fresh as we can.

Q. Following up on what you said, I found it interesting. Are you saying that all these teams scout you, but you're saying you have to actually play against it to experience it, to know, to play well against your style?

JIM FLANERY: I hope so. No, I mean the example -- two years ago when we played Colorado in the first round and they asked J.R. who does Creighton remind you of in the Pac-12, she said nobody. We beat Colorado. It was a dogfight.

But she said, I think she said a little bit like Utah but. So that's the hope is we are different. Like I said, UConn is the best team, but UConn gets to play us twice a year. So they have a little bit different familiarity.

So we're hoping that on one-day prep that UCLA has a hard time guarding our motion and that we make 15 threes (laughter). Or close to that.

Q. Just how much does going into Iowa two years ago as the 10 seed and getting the upset there, especially with a veteran team, benefit in a situation like this?

JIM FLANERY: I think we live in the best of all possible worlds because we have the experience of having gone to the Elite Eight last year, and last year we were out in the first round in a really kind of a thud. So your motivation's a little bit different. You have the confidence from two years ago, and you also have the motivation from knowing that we kind of just fell flat last year. Not that we didn't give effort, but we just didn't play well at all.

So I'd like to think that's the best of all possible worlds is you know you're good enough to win this game, and you're a little bit extra motivated because you didn't perform at the level that you wanted to last year.

Even as a coach, I'm not any different than our players, but I'm more optimistic based on what happened two years ago than I might possibly have been if that hadn't happened.

So I would imagine if you're 20 or 21 or 22 and you're sitting in that or you're getting ready to play tomorrow night, you're going to use that when things get tough tomorrow night because things are going to get tough, and we have to be able to play through it. You know, we played really well yesterday, but we didn't have 7,000 people cheering against us, we had a pretty similar fan base that UNLV had.

So it will be a little bit trickier tomorrow night, but our players, they'll be ready. We played at UConn in front of 14,000 just a few weeks ago. I think, if any team can handle it, this team can.

Q. Yesterday Molly picked up nine assists. How important is it to get her going, either from a play making perspective or from a score making perspective tomorrow against UCLA?

JIM FLANERY: She's important to our team. If you couldn't tell, I was a little upset with her on a couple defensive assignments that she wasn't where we needed her to be. But I kept her in the game.

I had to chew on her a little bit because she's that valuable. I said, I don't want to have to take you out of the game, but if you keep making the same defensive mistakes. But to your point, she had nine assists. She does a lot of things that most people don't see, and my expectations for her are high. That's why I feel like I can kind of chew on her like that.

Yeah, she does a great job of kind of understanding do I need to score it a little bit more? Because two of our -- one or two of our three leading scorers are struggling? Or are they going? Do I need to find them? Do I need to be a little bit more of a passer? I think she understands that because she's played with them so long.

Q. On a similar note, you mentioned getting the bench going. How important is it for Kiki or Kennedy to see a couple go in in the first half tomorrow?

JIM FLANERY: Well, I'd like for them to see it go in, but if they play well and the ball doesn't go in, that's fine too. Kennedy played fine yesterday, the ball just didn't go in for her. But maybe tomorrow Jayme isn't three for her first three threes and Kennedy hits one or two and Kiani hits one.

So our bench does have to play well. They don't necessarily have to shoot great. Maybe it's a little bit more dispersed, or it looks different than Jayme getting nine, but they have to play well for sure. We can't win without them contributing because we can't be so tired that -- like I said, we can't be so tired that we're standing around on offense, and we can't be so tired that we're -- you know, we're already going to be a half step slower or a little bit smaller at most positions.

So being fresh is important tomorrow. They have to play well.

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