

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - James Madison vs Kentucky

Friday, March 20, 2026

Morgantown, West Virginia, USA

Hope Coliseum

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Kenny Brooks

Clara Strack

Teonni Key

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions first followed by the head coach will make some comments first I should say and then we'll take questions. We'll begin by welcoming the University of Kentucky, the Wildcats, coming in with a 23-10 record from the SEC, received an at-large bid to the tournament. This is Kentucky's 19th appearance in the NCAA Championship including its second straight appearance.

Joining us this morning are student-athletes Clara Strack and Teonni Key as well as head coach Kenny Brooks. Coach Brooks, start us off with general comments about making it into the tournament and also about your first round match-up tomorrow against JMU.

KENNY BROOKS: We're excited to be here, obviously. To get through a grueling conference schedule in the SEC, hit a little bit of adversity. I really like what our team is, where they're playing, and we're excited. We're excited for the opportunity laid this front of us. We're just excited to be here.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions now.

Q. James Madison, give us a little bit of the scout on them and what you think of them and what do you guys got to do to pull out a victory?

TEONNI KEY: I mean, yeah, they're a good team. To make it into the tournament, you have to be. Our focus has been just playing our basketball, not taking any game for granted, going out and playing hard. Every possession matters. That's been our biggest focus and just respecting our opponent. Every game presents its challenges so just



locking in on them.

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, just what she said. We're focusing on -- obviously you don't know your opponent for a while so you focus on yourself a lot this little break. I think, like she said. Every time in this tournament at this point is going to be a good basketball team. Every team is going to play hard because it's you win or you go home.

We're excited for our match-up and I think we're ready.

Q. Coach, same thing, then, with you, JMU, a program you used to know really well, obviously. I'm sure they've changed a lot since your days. What do they look like now? Is it odd facing them?

KENNY BROOKS: It's not odd. They're a very good basketball team. They're well-coached. They have really good players. They have experienced players. Peyton McDaniel is a very tough, hard guard and she's a fifth year, I think sixth year kid so she's got a lot of experience. Barnes is a graduate player.

So they're going to come in, they're battle tested. They understand it. They probably had a little bit of heartbreak leading up to this year and then they got over the hump and they won a championship, so they fear no one. They played a really good schedule. We understand the challenges they present and we're looking forward just to an opportunity to go out and to continue playing basketball.

Q. For Clara. On the men's game, post players, it's really nothing to see big guys shoot from the outside. It's still kind of unique to see that on the women's game. I'm kind of wondering where did you develop your outside shooting and was it something you've always had or something you've had to work on? And what does that add to your game, being able to play inside and out?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, I mean, it's something we've worked on since I got on campus. I didn't really shoot outside in high school much. Since I got here, I've been shooting it consistently. This year and last year at Kentucky, Coach Brooks has really put a lot of confidence



in my shot and put a lot of trust in me shooting it, so I just take that and when the opportunity is there, I do take that. And, yeah, I think it just expands my game a little bit, gives it a little bit of a different look so you have to kind of guard everywhere.

Q. One of James Madison's strengths is defending the glass. How much of an emphasis did you guys put on rebounding heading into this match-up for either the players or the coach?

CLARA STRACK: Rebounding is definitely something we talked about a lot. That's something that I think we always talk about, though. We like to put a lot of pressure on the glass. We like to rebound. That's something that we always try to beat our opponents in is our rebounding. So we definitely have talked about that a lot, yeah.

Q. This is for Clara and Teonni. You guys have had a two-week layoff. What have you been working on and rest or whatever you guys need over the last two weeks?

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, we had that rest, which is good. And then coming back together as a team, we've just been working on all the things that we needed to work on in every aspect, just like us as a team staying together and individuals as well, just keeping us sharp offensively and defensively and just really locking in on the little things that may have slipped away from us in the SEC play and stuff like that, or an early game.

Just really sharpening all around and getting better on playing hard has been our biggest focus.

Q. For Clara and Teonni, going back to the rebounding thing, I believe TMU is top 15 in rebound margin. You all had a tough regular season going against tons of teams who can rebound really, obviously, in the SEC. How did that schedule prepare you coming into this game in terms of the battle on the boards? And what's your mindset going into the game knowing that you're going to have to crash the boards hard?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, like you said, the SEC, I think the SEC schedule kind of prepares you for anything, for all these games. It's a really tough schedule. You don't have an easy night so I think that does prepare you for the tournament. You have to take every single game seriously. You have to be ready to play every single night and I think that's what the SEC helps with a lot.

And like you said, the rebounding, I think that's a big part of just playing hard and refusing to lose, so I think that will help us with rebounding.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, absolutely. To second everything she said, honestly. And knowing that we're a good rebounding team too, we're a big team that we get the boards offensively and defensively so I think just having that toughness and that carryover has been a big focus for us.

Q. For the SEC Tournament specifically, having to make those quick turnarounds day-to-day, how much help is that in preparing for the NCAA Tournament if at all and what did you take away from that that you can apply here?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, that definitely prepares you. Here you do get a nice day in between, obviously, but I think that helps you a lot, teaches you to play through fatigue. Teaches you to play through any little challenge that might present to you.

We were already playing fresh teams when we were already fatigued, so, I think that all helps you learn to play hard, play through. Play through anything, really.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, it helps you see what you're really made of. When things are getting hard, when you're facing those second day legs or whatever it may be, how much you push through, how much as a team are you willing to all dig in? I think it really allowed us to come through even more and grow a lot from all the things that we went through.

Q. Last year you guys were a regional host. This year, close. Can you just kind of talk -- the great advantage of hosting is you get to sleep in your own bed and be at home. Being on the road this year, can you just kind of talk about what the advantages, disadvantages are of hosting as opposed to traveling to a regional?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, like you said. We did host last year and my freshman year we hosted too. Both times didn't exactly go our way. I'm excited to do something new being on the road. Something with being on the road also makes it -- it's a little more serious. It's a little more of a thing because you're in a hotel. You're on the road. Everything is very, like, down. You have a consistent schedule.

I think it does -- obviously it has it's -- we don't have our home fans, things like that, but I think there are, like you said, also advantages to playing on the road. Up to yeah, exactly. Everything she said. I think one of the advantages as well is just coming into somebody else's environment. It just really adds that edge to you really want to quiet the crowd so I think it's going to be fun.

We're super excited.

Q. Last year for the tournament, first game you win it by one point. Second game, you lose it by one point. And the tough schedule this year and close games this year. With the tournament last year, what did you learn from that and take from that and kind of used it towards this year?

CLARA STRACK: Yeah, just finishing out games. That's something we talked about a lot this year. You just have to play. You have to play every possession like it's the last possession of the game, I think. Your winning plays don't happen at the end of the game with a few seconds on the clock. They happen a lot throughout the game. If you can stack those throughout the game, you'll be fine.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for our student-athletes? All right. We can excuse our student-athletes. Thank you very much. We'll take questions here in just a moment for Coach Brooks.

Q. I hate to bring up bad memories but last year you lost to a dangerous 5 seed in the NCAA Tournament and obviously I think you want to host but Clara was just talking about how it's nice to kind of have a change of pace. Was there a part of you heading into this tournament that's like, well, I want to be this dangerous 5 seed and ruin someone else's court?

KENNY BROOKS: First my original thought is I think that the NCAA should have super regionals and I think that everything should be there and you're talking to someone who has hosted the last three years. But you talk about the whole student-athlete experience.

I think my first year that we played in an NCAA Tournament it was super regionals and we went to Pittsburgh I think it was and there were eight teams in the hotel, in the city. It was a buzz. It was great. Probably the best NCAA experience I had other than going to the Final Four, but I just think that's my opinion.

Now, building off of last year, we had some tough games. This year we're coming on the road. We just have to circle the wagon so to speak. This is a very tough venue. I have been in this venue before. We have tough a points. It's very good basketball teams at this site.

I think that it will be a really good showing for the weekend, but just me and my experiences for the student-athletes, I'm a big fan of the super regionals, kind of like what the men are doing. It just puts you like you're at an NCAA event. You work all year to get to this kind to make it to the NCAA Tournament and you want it to be an event.

Sad to say, I think one of the best times I had, too, is when we went to San Antonio during COVID. Every team was in one place and it was kind of like a really big AAU tournament or something. Just had a really good buzz to it.

But we're going to come out here and last year, as you mentioned, we played against Kansas State who were very similar to us this year because they went through the season and they lost one of their star players and I think I said it back then, I didn't think that they were a 5 seed. I thought that they were really a 3 seed at worst but because of not having one of their star players, they lost some games. They had to kind of keep float. They came to us as a 5 seed and we were really good. We look to hope to do the same thing.

We went through a year -- I read articles all the time on ESPN and they say we lost five out of six in January but they never say that you didn't have Teonni Key and that's a big part of what we do and how it was done, but nonetheless, we are where we are. We're fortunate to be here, to be playing and we're going to give it our best.

Q. Five 12 seeds in the NCAA are kind of upset-minded seeds, seed match-ups every time. How do you portray that to your team and your players and the importance of just how hard they're going to come after you?

KENNY BROOKS: We don't talk about seeds. If you look at it, I don't -- I'm not in the committee Selection Show. I have no idea how James Madison is a 12 seed. They did everything right. They played some power fours. They went out, won some of those games. They won, I think, 12 in a row. I think they were a mid to low net rating. I don't know how they're a 12 seed.

We don't go out and talk about, hey, this is a 12 seed. They're going to be upset-minded. They're going to come out and they're going to play hard. We understand that. We know what they do. We just really talk to our kids about being the best version of ourselves and we're not talking about we're playing against a 12 seed. We're playing against whatever.

James Madison is our opponent and we got to make sure we play to the best of our ability so we can play to the best of our ability so we can win a basketball game, but we don't talk about another opponent's seeding.

Q. This is West Virginia's first time hosting a regional in, like, over three decades. There's a certain buzz that comes with that. I'm assuming the first year you guys

hosted at Virginia Tech might have been a similar situation. Having gone through that first time as a host, is there anything that you can share with us on was it crazy? Was it nerves? Was there things that maybe you wish you would have done differently? Things that popped up that you never expected? What's it like hosting that first regional for the first time?

KENNY BROOKS: You're going to be nervous as hell. (Laughter) There is an expectation that comes with it. It is. You get to sleep in your own bed. You get to do things that are very familiar to you, but there is an expectation, a responsibility that you hold because you get a great crowd. They're rowdy, they come out and sometimes you see the other team play freely because they essentially have "nothing to lose" and you have everything to lose because you're playing in front of your home crowd.

There is an expectation. There is a responsibility that comes with it. I'll be very honest. We carried that weight. It was like okay. You got to win, you got to win, you got to win. So there are some nerves involved with it. We're on the other side of it now this time. We're just going to come out and go play freely, but at the end of the day, it's just kind of like what Clara said. You just have to will yourself to win, whether you're hosting or the underdog. You just got to go out and play.

Q. I know it's a reunion of you getting to face Coach O once again after a decade of being on the same sideline together. Have you guys had a chance to be able to catch up with one another since the selection was announced? And how have you seen Coach O take over as a head coach throughout this past decade from when he first took over to now?

KENNY BROOKS: We shared a couple of texts throughout the week, but nothing extensive, obviously. But he's done a really good job there and James Madison is a wonderful school. It's a wonderful athletic program. He's done his part to keep women's basketball afloat along side football. Men's basketball has done well lately. All the other Olympic sports. But it's a wonderful school you keep up with them as an alum and you're very proud of what everybody has done there.

As far as the competition, it's been ten years, ten years since I've been there. Hell, I don't even know what I had for lunch yesterday. So you don't remember a whole lot about it but you know you're very proud of what you were able to accomplish there.

A lot of people want to make a lot to do about this particular game with me and women's basketball, but I

have just as many memories there playing on the men's side or my friends that I had when I was in college. So ten years removed, it just really makes it another basketball game and it really does. I have coached against former assistants two years ago, three years ago. My first round opponent was my assistant, Shawn Poppie who was at Chattanooga at the time. NCAA has a funny way of making that happen a lot.

It's ten years removed and I'm obviously proud as an alum of everything that's happened to James mad Don but tomorrow it will be another game.

Q. I'm just curious if you have kept a tab on Coach O throughout this decade from when he first took over to now, what you have seen in his growth as a head coach as well.

KENNY BROOKS: To be honest with you, I mean, like I said, just from afar I have seen it and he's done a really good job winning games. I have been being doing my own thing too and raising kids and doing a lot of other stuff.

But I'm proud, like I said, as an alum, I'm very proud of everything that's gone on there and he's done a good job. We talk. We talk from time to time. Kayla Cooper Williams, his assistant coach, she came down to Kentucky this summer and she watched us work out, some post players and I coached her for a year. There's always going to be a connection.

Q. Coach, piggybacking off that, what is something that you learned at JMU that you have used throughout the years to Virginia Tech and even until now?

KENNY BROOKS: Man, you don't have enough time for me to answer that question. (Laughter) Again, I know people want to talk about my time as a women's basketball coach there, but it goes so further back. I was a skinny little scared kid from Waynesboro, Virginia who went to James Madison and everybody there just welcomed me in. They helped make me who I am today.

My daughters were born on campus. I got married on campus. I coached on the men's side for a long time. Then I became the women's basketball coach. If you want to talk about things that I've taken from there who have made me who I am at Virginia Tech and Kentucky, we have to go way back. Way back.

That's home. My in-laws live there. I have family who still live there. That's my school. When they went to the CFP, I was repping JMU stuff just like all my other alumni. Group texts and all that kind of stuff. It's where I started. It's where I started. I lived in Harrisonburg for longer than I

lived in Waynesboro, Virginia. My mom will tell me, hey, do you remember such-and-such talking about Waynesboro and I'm like no. It was the first 17 years of my life. But if somebody asked me about somebody in Harrisonburg, I'm like oh, yeah, I remember them, because that was the next chapter in my life. So I learn sod much there that I have taken. The lessons that I learned there as a player, as a student and as a coach have really helped me become who I am today. It will always be home. It's just where I grew up.

Q. The other three teams here all won their conference tournament. What does your mindset have to be, the other three teams have momentum and they're battle tested and all that.

KENNY BROOKS: Do you know what league we played in? (Laughter) Trust me, you know? I have been on the other end when we won conference championships, whether I was add a mid-major or a power four. That momentum that you have going in, you won, you won, and it feels good. It feels good. But when you turn the page and you go to the next chapter, it has nothing to do with anything. It really doesn't. As they are battle tested in their plight and what they were able to do, we're battle tested, too.

The last game we played was against South Carolina. The game before that we had to play number 22 Georgia. And so everyone's battle tested in their own right and I take nothing away from it because it is great momentum, feel good that you won your last game heading into the NCAA Tournament, but it really has no bearing when the ball is tipped up.

Q. Going back to the Virginia connection, Asia Boone, last year she played for Liberty, kind of saw her in the tournament there. Obviously she didn't get to play much, she got hurt. She kind of mentioned how you all, through connections, through that Virginia connection you kind of connected that way. Obviously she has stepped up this season in a big role when injuries came about. So this is kind of like a redo for her to play for real in the tournament. What are you expecting from here? What have you seen from her this year and how big has she been for this game?

KENNY BROOKS: She's been huge for us. Very proud of her and glad that we're giving her an opportunity to come out and play this year. Last year she played against us maybe two or three minutes and she hurt her foot. But you go back throughout the season, she's been everything and more for us. We've asked her to do things she wasn't really comfortable doing, playing a back-up point guard and then we inserted her into the starting lineup I think

mid-January and she's really helped us get off to great starts.

She adds an element to us that makes us really hard to guard. When you have her on one side and Amelia Hasset on the other side, it just really opens up a lot of things for Teonni and Clara down low and for Tonie having driving lanes. I'm very proud of her and what she's done but she's been tremendous for us and for her to play at Liberty and to come here and almost have identical stats for a team that's ranked in the top, I don't know what we're ranked now, 15, 16, that's really huge.

I'm very proud of her. She's had a great year for us.

Q. On Clara's outside shooting ability, do you remember what kind of sparked the idea that said oh, hey, maybe we should take a look at that? And then how much of a difference does it make having a 6'5" post player who can also stretch the floor the way she does? Because to me, it seems unique in the women's game.

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, when we were at Tech, I remember the first weekend they came in, it was five freshman and they were all just kind of walking around. It was a Saturday night, I think it was. They were all in the gym messing around. Everybody else we recruited were guards, so they were all out there just jacking up three-point shots and she was right there with them just jacking them up and I kept noticing to myself, well, she's making as many as the others. We're going to add that to her game.

We didn't do a lot at Tech because she played behind Liz Kitley and when we got here, that's something we really honed in on. I've taken a beating sometimes because people say I let her shoot too many threes, but it's part of the bigger picture and part of the bigger picture was that Clara is going to play in the WNBA one day. If she's going to play and stick, and I want her to be a really good player in the W, she's going to have to learn how to shoot from the outside.

So we made a commitment to it and to shoot it and I work with her every day and we shoot every day. We shoot. We shoot. We shoot. And last year and this year was just to get her used to shooting them in the game. Like I said, people were like why do you let her shoot so many? I even told the local people, she's going to make four or five in a game. She got me off the hook in the Georgia game when she made five, yeah.

She shoots as well as anyone. It's just a matter of her learning how to shoot them in a game. She's starting to

get more and more comfortable. When she can do that, it really spreads things open for us. It's hard to put a traditional center on her because they can't chase her out on the perimeter and then you try to put a smaller player on her and she takes them inside. It's just her versatility is continuing to grow and that's just part of it.

Q. I know you talked about JMU's seeding but when you have been able to look at the film throughout this last week, what's stood out to you? What challenges to the Duke's present?

KENNY BROOKS: They're a good basketball team. Peyton McDaniel is a really good player. She's big. She's physical. I think we have size that can play around on their perimeter which may be different than some of the things that they've seen but she's going to present challenges for us. Barnes is a really hard guard. Robinson. They're good. They're experienced. They have kids who have played at the power four level and that he know you transfer it back.

But they're a good basketball team and I know you guys talked about their rebounding which is tenacious, but we're a good rebounding team too. If you're going to survive in the SEC, you have to be a good rebounding team. We understand that and we know that and they're going to come out and they're going to be hungry just like we're going to be hungry so I think it's going to be a really good game.

Q. You have five seniors on this team. Have you seen a sense of urgency leading up to their final March Madness?

KENNY BROOKS: You always see it. Joy it in different ways. Sometimes joy it nah a negative light because sometimes late February they see the light at the end of the tunnel and so sometimes they get a little sad and you have to reel them back in. This has been a really good group. They've been a fun group all year. They've been resilient. They've been willing to listen, willing to learn and they understand the magnitude of last year's disappointment that we had. It was really eye-opening for them. They really are just trying to do whatever they can to be ready for whoever we're going to be playing so that they can put their best foot forward. I'm excited for them and we'll see what happens.

THE MODERATOR: All right, very good. Thank you very much. Good luck.

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