

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Kentucky vs West Virginia

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Morgantown, West Virginia, USA

Hope Coliseum

West Virginia Mountaineers

Gia Cooke

Carter McCray

Coach Mark Kellogg

Media Conference



with guards to me.

Q. Gia, if I'm not wrong, when you were at Maryland you guys hosted?

GIA COOKE: Yes.

Q. Can you just compare and contrast the experiences? Then you didn't play as much as you did last night.

GIA COOKE: Yeah, when I hosted at Maryland, it's definitely different from here. I don't think we sold out our arena, but it was, like, the same experience kind of, just having everybody, all your fans here in Maryland and having all your fans here in West Virginia. I think it's a cool experience to have. It's another type of team on your back that you have. Different energy and things like that. The atmosphere was great, honestly.

Q. How long did it take for you guys to come down after all the excitement yesterday and move on to the next game?

GIA COOKE: I think it was pretty quick. I think just knowing that we're going to second round, okay, let's keep, stay grounded, keep our head on the shoulders the right way, stay locked in and just get ready to play the next team. I think we want to go for a and we want to keep dancing. Just moving on. We were definitely excited to get past that game, but we have more work to do. I think we all just locked back in and got ready for it.

CARTER McCRAY: Yeah, I definitely agree. We both know we're not done yet. The whole team knows that. We have bigger goals ahead and we want to keep dancing. We want to keep playing in March.

Q. Carter, in the first half last night, Miami double and triple-teamed you and Meme in the post, and in the second half, you guys were able to get a little more free. What did you change up? What did you talk about at halftime?

CARTER McCRAY: I think just taking what they're doing

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for our student-athletes first followed by the head coach we'll begin by welcoming West Virginia University, the Mountaineers advance to the second round of the tournament by defeating Miami University yesterday, 82-54. We're pleased to be joined today by student-athletes Gia Cooke and Carter McCray. We'll open it up for questions for our student-athletes.

Q. For both of you, but start with Carter, the length of Kentucky sort of stands out when you see that. How does that impact what you do? You've faced bigs between Wisconsin and here, but I don't know if their different and then, how does that impact guards, too?

CARTER McCRAY: It's definitely a thing, but I feel like it's nothing really new for us. Being in the Big 12 Conference, we've played against a lot of length with other teams.

Just being cognizant of it, some more shot fakes and we know they have a couple shot blockers on their team. We're pretty used to it. I think we'll be prepared.

Q. How do guards have to impact that length?

GIA COOKE: Playing against different guards or different bigs?

Q. Their length.

GIA COOKE: I don't think it's no crazy length but when we have mismatches, we kind of, you know, play to our strengths with that and take the advantage is our goal with that. I think it's not no crazy height difference of anything



and kind of adjusting for both of us. I know I turned the ball over a got amount of times, so just slowing down a little bit.

Before I take a dribble, looking to see where the double is coming from, looking for the pass out more and just playing more poised.

But I think both of us, we've been doubled before, triple-teamed before. Just settling down into that, we know what to do, and we work on that in practice.

Q. Kentucky has a really good defense and so do you guys. I don't know how much you were able to watch of yesterday's game. I know Coach Kellogg watched a little bit, but do you guys expect a low-scoring defensive match-up?

GIA COOKE: You can say that. We watched film and, of course, we defend the ball as well. We're going to try our best to turn our offense -- the people over, Kentucky over and get out on offense, of course. We saw their defense. We saw how they like to guard. They have length on them, of course, so we're just going to try to play our style of defense first and see if that gets us more offense in transition first.

Q. Carter, how have you guys become such a good rebounding team when you don't look like you're the longest team in the world, especially frontline, but you have rebounded most teams you've faced. How have you done that and how do you do that tomorrow against Kentucky?

CARTER McCRAY: I think rebound really is a want. We really want it. Even though we may seem undersized a little bit in the post position. Even the guards get a good amount of rebounds. It's just wanting extra possessions, wanting to win, and doing those little things for the team that make us better and contribute to the wins. I just feel like we're all a group of dogs and we'll do whatever it takes to get wins.

GIA COOKE: Yeah, quote that.

Q. Carter, Strack for Kentucky kind of does what Meme does and she'll take a mid range or take a three to kind of spread it out. How do you defend that? Obviously she can go in the post, too. How do you defend both of those options?

CARTER McCRAY: Definitely it's not just going to be a one-person defensive game with her. Obviously we're going to attack it from different angles and just playing up. We know she can hit that mid-range shot. We know she can shoot the three. Just playing her at every level, but definitely there's other post players that will be on her. It

won't just be a thing with me.

I just have faith in my teammates to help and just be there. She's a great player, so but I think we're prepared to defend her well.

Q. Gia, for you, you guys experience a quick turnaround, especially at the Big 12 Tournament. You guys are so unique defensively. Those were conference teams, they'd seen you, but when you're facing a team that hasn't seen you, how hard do you think you guys are to prepare for?

GIA COOKE: How hard we are to prepare for?

Q. Yeah.

GIA COOKE: We're going to give you different looks. I think we essentially have all pieces of our offense from the one to the five. It can be anybody's game. We had four people in double figures yesterday. We share the ball. We spray the ball. We spread the love, clearly.

It can be anybody's night, but I think tomorrow we're just going to go in and play our style of basketball how we want to attack the rim, how we want to defend and I think it would just all come together once we settle in and really get a feel for how Kentucky wants to play, how they want to guard us and things like that. We never know.

It's just one day preparation, so we're going to go in here and just lock in and try to be very intentional on how we want to play this game tomorrow.

Q. How do you guys rely on your seniors from a leadership standpoint in the post-season and what kind of things are they telling you guys differently from what you might be telling the rest of the team?

GIA COOKE: I think we all have a pretty big voice when it comes to from the guard position, of course. But our seniors definitely just keep us kind of motivated and telling us things that we need to hear. I think we just all have a really good togetherness about us that we all just try to pick each other up and next play. We just all kind of know how we want to be talked to. Hey, Carter, hey, next play. Things like that. We just know how to pick each other up and be together about it. It's never none of those negative things.

And our coaches do well with just keeping us locked in and things like that. Our seniors do a good job communicating with us well.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for our

student-athletes? Ladies, thank you. Good luck.

Joining us now is West Virginia head coach Mark Kellogg. Coach, if you can start with just some general comments about your big win yesterday and how your team is preparing for tomorrow's second round match-up against Kentucky.

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, obviously pleased to still be here and advancing in the tournament. That's obviously one of the goals is to continue and play. Even as a coach, it's to get to game plan again and let them hang around each other and have another meal of two together. That's what this is a lot about. You want to extend it as long as you can.

I thought the environment yesterday was electric. The atmosphere was awesome. The fan base here is special. Hopefully we can do that and run it back again tomorrow evening.

Obviously Kentucky is a very, very good basketball team. Very well-coached. We'll present some challenges and some different ones, so it's a different game plan that you work hard at now and it's a quick turnaround but that's why you have great staff and great people around you. You're 34, 35 game plans in so I'm sure we can draw from one of the previous game plans to make it a little bit easier on our kids to play freely and not get too caught up in the game plan.

But certainly excited, looking forward to the opportunity to take the floor one more time against a quality opponent in Kentucky.

Q. As you talked about that and looked at the scout and looked for some comparisons in past opponents, Kentucky's length stands out to you. Have you faced anybody that's similar? How do you combat that?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, I think there's some that we're going to draw from. I'm probably not going to tell you who because I don't want them to go back and look at that. But, yeah, they're not exactly like anybody but I think we could probably go to two or three specific teams that the game plan might look somewhat similar. Their length is probably some of your superpower.

They're talented in other ways, too, so I don't want to just get caught up in that. But it's their ability to play with the length, how they utilize their length is exceptional. When you look at all the numbers and analytics and you watch them on film, there's not a lot of holes.

That's what happens when you get to this stage. We're

down to 32 teams. Over the last two teams, half of the 68, I guess or 64 were eliminated so you're down to quality competition at this point. That's what you expect. That's what this is about. If you don't play well, you don't execute, you probably don't advance at this point.

So they present some problems and so you're kind of in some ways trying to find little areas that you can steal something or pick your poison or play to an area they're not as strong in and for us, trying to find strengths that we have that hopefully we can exploit.

Q. Mark, have you faced anybody like Strack who is 6'5" and seems like a three-level scorer?

MARK KELLOGG: Maybe not all wrapped up into one. She's a little bit of an I think exception to the rule, probably with the talent at 6'5" and the best of my ability to play all over from the three-point line all the way in.

Obviously to the Dirk fade. You don't see that a whole lot. That's very rare. Rebounds at a high rate, plays with a ton of confidence. Kenny did a great job developing her and allowing her to play as free as she does.

There's some that are similar, so, again, you're going back to some of those game plans where she's not exactly like but we can maybe play it like we did so-and-so and even have to add some details or some attention just because of her skill set.

Q. The team shot pretty well from the free-throw line last night, above season average. How much emphasis was put on that in last week's practice? Did you notice any increase in concentration and focus from the team in yesterday's game?

MARK KELLOGG: Well, yeah, I hope. I guess. I don't know that we had to do it any differently as the year progresses, as you get to the late regular season games. Then you go through the conference tournament. Possessions are magnified. Free throws, to answer your question, are magnified. I don't want to overhype it or make them feel stressed because they get there, but, yeah, when you get there, you want to take advantage. Those are opportunities to get some free points on the board while the clock is stopped and resting and those types of things.

Whether it's free throws, finishing layups, these are possession games. Anybody that wins the possession battle typically it goes in their favor, especially if you're making shots.

Kentucky is a phenomenal rebounding team so you want to



either rebound some or find ways to steal them there. Better make the first one because you may not get it back. So just finding quality shots, whether that's the free-throw line or anywhere. I think other than that, we were relaxed and kind of playing in the flow.

Q. I'm kind of thinking back to last year and the Carolina game. Generating offense, obviously, gets very difficult once you get to this level. I'm kind of wondering, do you expect that same kind of issues against Kentucky? And if it does become this scoring struggle for both teams, how do you battle through that?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, I don't know what you expect. You go in expecting anything that could happen. It could be that. I think both teams are really good defensively. We do it completely differently. This will be kind of strength on strength, I guess. We may have the speed or quickness. They may have some length and some other things on us.

I think you're just trying to find ways. We're going to try to help our group today and tomorrow leading up to it to find ways to get points. It certainly could be, as you alluded to, it may be a defensive struggle.

Both offenses may get going. Maybe some fatigue defensively that you get slow on some rotations and you get good teams out there that will make you pay if you do make a mistake and don't rotate correctly. Those things get exposed as well. I think we'll be prepared for whatever the game presents.

Q. Going off of yesterday's game, towards the end of both the first and second quarters, you guys went on those runs. Was there anything said in those time-outs towards the end that kind of kick started things or was it just your team settling in?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, no, nothing really said. We talk, every coach probably does, about finishing quarters, starting quarters, those types of things. Whether that means the last three minutes, four minutes, maybe it's one possession. I thought we had the crowd at its loudest when we went up 17 late and then we give up the wrong rotation and they drilled a three on us and we lost that mojo pretty quick because I was really to run into halftime with that place being really, really loud.

So, no, it's just feeding off of what we can. We talk about those things. Most coaches probably do, so I don't think that's anything new to us, but, yeah, how end quarters and start them is significant.

Q. Coach, it felt like yesterday that Meme and Cece had their hands on the ball a little bit more at the top of the key than usual. With Kentucky's size, do you expect to play like that again tomorrow? How do your guards play a little bit differently and contribute differently when you're playing like that?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, we don't want to go completely away from everything we do. We've played some teams with some length, so, again, we'll draw some of those experiences and I think we've gotten better and more comfortable as the year has gone on playing against length that they're going to have over us for sure, especially at those three positions.

I think there's some things we'll ask the guards to do. I think there's some things we'll ask the posts to do that will be a little bit differently, but I guess you started the question with the ball in Cece and Meme's hands. I don't know that that's going to change because that's something that we like to do and they can pass and play and operate out of that high post area.

If that's what the game calls for, we'll be ready for that. If the game calls for something else, we'll be prepared to do some other things with the guards as well.

Q. In your post-season experience over the years, not just here, but going back, your defense is unique. You get this quick turnaround. How has an opponent typically handled that? Someone who has not faced it in the past. I would imagine that it presents some problems for an point. You may not feel sorry for them, but have you noticed that others have problems on a quick turnaround?

MARK KELLOGG: No, we won't feel sorry, probably at this point. Really honestly it started a little bit, again, I'll go back, and I talked about it last night but in the Division II level, when you get to the NCAA Tournament, one team hosts eight schools and you play back-to-back, so you play Friday, Saturday, you get Sunday off and you play on Monday.

We always thought that was an advantage the way we played and that's even part of why we played the way we did. Once we got to that level, it was like, man, you have to play us on a Friday night and turnaround and try to prepare for all of that on a Saturday and then if you win that one, you get one day prep to play three games in four days. If you're the host site, then you got all sorts of advantages there, again.

So there's some advantages. I think you get to this level, too, though, just like I talked about we're going to pull off

game plans. Kentucky's played Tennessees and Ole Misses and lots of teams that probably play somewhat like we do, so I'm sure they're going to pull some game plans from some of those games as well.

So is it an advantage to us? Maybe. I guess you would have to ask them. From our side, yeah, maybe.

Q. I asked Meme, last night, but what was going through your head when she was going coast to coast and then is that the sign that things are going pretty good?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, I mean, when you're playing with the ultimate confidence, I guess. She can do that. She's not a bad ball handler. We haven't seen it a ton. Seen it a few times in practice, but it was kind of just -- I think she was waiting to give it up and then it was like a parting of the seas so to speak a little bit. If she sees rim, she knows to go to rim, so she continued her route there. No one really stopped her, and, yeah.

Looked pretty good and that's why you're asking about it because we haven't seen it a whole lot. Yeah, she has ability to do that, so I was fine. Even if she had missed, I probably would have been fine.

Q. In regards to Meme this year, she's had some success in some of these match-ups when she's been undersized, maybe given up a couple of inches. What allows for that? What makes her, I guess, excel when she's giving up three and four inches in certain post match-ups?

MARK KELLOGG: I think mindset. She probably doesn't realize she's giving up or doesn't want to accept that she's giving up three or four inches. Meme is just going to play the way she does is what I've learned about her in the years. She's passionate. She's aggressive. She loves these moments. She loves those match-ups. That's why she came here. That's what she talked about throughout recruiting process was wanting to play at this level.

Yeah, she's a little undersized. We knew that, but she's very productive at what she does. Yeah, she'll be excited for this one as she has been for probably all of these games lately. I think you will probably get the best version of Meme you can. She's been a great contribute other for us. It's what we've needed. Her ability to score in the paint, defensive rebound for us, play with that toughness and that edge that she just kind of filters through the rest of the team.

Her and Gia in particular, Jordan, we have seen her do it and Shaw has that toughness but to add those two as well

has been really, really good for her dynamic.

Q. You have been asked about Kentucky's size but specifically their shot-blocking ability. Be that adjust your team's play or game plan at all?

MARK KELLOGG: Well, yeah, it's something you have to discuss. TCU's a pretty good shot-blocking team as well. It can be a similar conversation, maybe, to some of their length at the rim. But, yeah, I think Kentucky leads the country in blocked shots. Maybe they're second but I think I saw they were first. It's when you get to the rim, what's our decision making? Do we have space? Are they blocking it from the on ball defender? Are they coming from the help side? They do both.

Yeah, I think there's some things we've talked about that we would like to attack if that happens, but at the same time, if we're being aggressive and they block a shot, then I'll accept it and we'll move on and play the next possession, whether it's still our ball or maybe they block it and retain possession, we'll sprint back on defense and get ready. It's certainly something you have to be prepared for.

Q. Ever since you went to TCU and you lost, you haven't lost since. Do you feel like something flipped there? The girls said they just kind of put it behind them and they learned from their mistakes. Do you feel the same way or is there something that you adjusted from the coaching side?

MARK KELLOGG: No, I don't know if any of that -- no, we just continued to get better. We thought we played really well in that game minus those five minutes to start the third quarter and let one slip away.

Yeah, I think we were disappointed. We were playing from behind for a regular season title after that, so we knew our margin of error was really small. In a sense, it became kind of post-season-ish basketball at that standpoint and we knew we were going to continue to play but if we wanted a piece of the regular season, we probably needed to win them all. We got to the tournament, we knew we wanted to win the tournament but we had other goals, like, to be here.

We've just been in post-season mode, maybe, since then. Outside of that, no, we didn't change a whole lot of what we do. We just maybe have done it a little bit better since then.

Q. Kentucky yesterday jumped out to a 32-10 lead in the first quarter. Is that something that you're being cognizant of, that they can come out and punch you in

the mouth? And how do you avoid that happening?

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, that first quarter won them the game, I think, yesterday. I don't know, did they win the fourth? I don't know if they won the fourth. I think they lost the second and the third quarters but that's plenty. That's what can happen this time -- if you're not careful and you're not on it, teams go on big runs. We saw that across the tournament.

Yeah, I think you've got to be dialed in. I would hope that that doesn't happen and we better be prepared. I think they start well, though, from the games that I've seen them play. They do have really good first quarters and they come out and their length and some of the things, their ability to shoot the basketball and spread it.

Hassett and Boone can absolutely fill it up. You have to be careful there, too. You just don't want them to find rhythm early. I think it will be on us defensively to make sure we take them out of rhythm early. I'm sure they will be trying to the same thing to us.

But, yeah, they got off to a great start and that settled them really quick.

Q. A couple of your players said not the same opponent but philosophically or just the lineups, Miami is similar to Kentucky. I'm curious how much you agree with that and in short turnarounds, to have that kind of a continuity in game plan, how advantageous is that?

MARK KELLOGG: So you're asking is Miami similar to Kentucky?

Q. Not athletically, I get that. But they had the point guard that handles the ball. They have bigs who can shoot. They play a little bit quicker is what Jordan said. But they saw some similarities between the two.

MARK KELLOGG: Yeah, some, probably. It's a different game plan for sure. Different, obviously, size, level of athlete. They can shoot it. They don't shoot it as many positions as Miami did, so they had post players that could stretch us. I think you play some of those mid-majors, that's what happens. They don't have as much size as we have seen over the last several months so it changes what you do a little bit defensively from a post player perspective.

Kentucky has a dynamic point guard, one that leads them, high assists like Miami so there would be a comparable there for sure and what Morgan and the Singer kid did yesterday. So there's some parallels but, no, there's a lot

that are a little bit different. The game plan will change, but like I said, we have used pieces from a lot of different game plans this year that we'll kind of put together.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? Coach, thank you very much. Good luck.

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