

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

Monday, March 23, 2026

Morgantown, West Virginia, USA

Hope Coliseum

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Kenny Brooks

Tonie Morgan

Clara Strack

Teonni Key

Media Conference

Kentucky - 74, West Virginia - 73

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin by taking questions for our student-athletes. We have with us Teonni Key, Clara Strack, and Tonie Morgan.

Q. Tonie, start with you. In terms of their pressure, which their noted for, you guys handled it as well as you thought you could? Give me your analysis of how you handled their pressure.

TONIE MORGAN: I think we came out pretty good, strong. I think we handled it good from the jump. Could have done better, of course, but we faced tough defenses like this all year, and I think we're pretty well prepared for it.

Q. Teonni, at the end of the game, West Virginia they missed that shot, but you get the big rebound to kind of end things. What's going through your mind in those end of game moment to try to help this team get the win?

TEONNI KEY: I think just locking in. Like all year rebounding has been a crucial aspect of what we do. I think just securing the board there and then just knowing the situation of the game, just calling a timeout, getting us back in the huddle and back locked in.

Q. Clara, it's a pretty good third quarter you had there. Just talk about that. What was going through your mind, how you handled it. Yeah, what was that third quarter like for you?



CLARA STRACK: I think we just said like at halftime, like we've got to come out with energy. We have to come out playing hard, playing harder than them, because they do play really hard. I think that was all that was going through my mind, just doing whatever it took in those moments for the best of the team.

Q. Clara and Teonni, you guys had a height advantage tonight. You both came away with double-doubles. Just talk about your play tonight and how it was out there for you in this game tonight.

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, we were a bigger team, I think, just they had been telling us that in the shootarounds and practice and stuff like that and just highlighting that advantage we knew. All year we've been a long team. So I think just really exposing that and just going at them, honestly.

CLARA STRACK: I love playing with Teonni. I hope she feels the same about me.

TEONNI KEY: Absolutely.

CLARA STRACK: I think we also play really well together. Not just one of us can do that by ourselves. We need each other, and we do a really good job of playing off one another.

Like you said, we did have a height advantage. So you have to take obviously whatever advantage you get and then use that.

Q. Clara and Teonni, you guys finished with each only one foul, yet it seemed like you affected numerous shots at the rim. How does that go about? Can you just explain how you're on the floor for so long and playing physical but only picking up one foul apiece?

CLARA STRACK: I think just trying to play smart. Trying to, like Coach Brooks has told us all year, trying to affect the shots. We don't have to block them, but just trying to affect them with our length to keep us on the floor and keep us out of foul trouble because that's something we've

definitely struggled with in the past.

TEONNI KEY: I was about to say exactly, yeah.

Q. Tonie, just the physicality of the game out on the perimeter, fighting through the screens, watching West Virginia players fight through you guys' screens, what was that like? How painful was it sometimes trying to get through some of that stuff?

TONIE MORGAN: It wasn't painful at all. It was fun. That was a fun game, a fun atmosphere. You want to play tough teams like that because we played it all year, why change it up now? It was very exciting. We got the win, so that's very exciting.

Q. Last year about this same time you were up against Liberty and jumped out to a pretty good sized lead. Liberty comes battling back like West Virginia did today. Could you learn anything from last year that carried over until this year?

TEONNI KEY: Yeah, I would say just staying composed. Basketball is a game of runs, especially in March, and in this environment they've got some extra fuel.

So I think just us staying composed and staying together was the main focus. We knew they'd go on runs. We knew we'd go on runs. So just having each other's backs and talking and just doing what we do, staying focused on that and not letting other things like sway us, I think that was the most important part.

Q. Tonie, you mentioned the atmosphere. What was it like even being a road team to play in an atmosphere like that, and what does it do for the sport?

TONIE MORGAN: I mean, one, it's so fun to play in just to know that people show up for women's sports. Women's sports is trending right now, and I hope it keeps trending upwards. It's just fun. No one wants to play in front of a dead crowd. So I'm happy that West Virginia and even Kentucky came out. So it's pretty nice.

Q. For all three, you guys had double digit leads at two different times during the game, and West Virginia kept battling back. I'm just kind of wondering, kind of take me through that. Did you guys think -- I think once you guys had a 14-, 15-point lead. Did you think maybe the game was kind of in hand there, or were you expecting another run from West Virginia? Just the back and forth from both teams, what was that like?

TONIE MORGAN: I'll say it's March. Teams were going to

go on runs. You've just got to expect it at all times. You can never get too comfortable no matter how much you're up. It's March. Just be prepared for anything.

Q. Coach Brooks has talked about his 90-10 philosophy about responding to adversity a lot. Just how big was it in this game?

CLARA STRACK: I think it was huge because, like Tonie just mentioned, they did go on runs. We went on runs. There was never a settled point in the game where you could have relaxed at all. It was huge. We faced a lot of adversity.

It was a physical game, so I think that was huge today, and I think we did a really good job with it.

Q. Tonie, you and Jordan Harrison were going back and forth a lot. What can you say about the kind of player, defensive and offensive, that she is?

TONIE MORGAN: She's a good player. Much respect. She's carried this team this far. I think she was defensive Player of the Year in the Big 12. That just shows how good of a player she is.

It's fun. You like to play against good competition. So I had a lot of fun.

KENNY BROOKS: First and foremost, I want to give credit to West Virginia, not only the program, but the fans. They came out, and any time that you can capitalize on a situation like this and help grow the sport, I thought it was tremendous atmosphere, very respectful fans, very knowledgeable fans, really just cheering for their team.

It provided memories not only for us, because we won, but memories for West Virginia players to be playing in a situation in an atmosphere like this.

Mark does a tremendous job. I've known of Mark for a very long time. We actually exchanged pleasantries. We're going to get together. We have two very contrasting styles. I really would love to learn how he does stuff, and I think he wants to learn how we do some things.

It was just a tremendous weekend for us, our team. Very hard fought game. This was kind of like deja vu. The last two years we've hosted. I've been able to host as a 4 seed, and we lost this game. So for us to be able to learn from all that, especially last year -- we lost by one point to Kansas State, to a team that I thought was not a 5 seed. They had injuries. So they were delegated to a 5 seed.

West Virginia played their way into the opportunity to host.



They deserved it. I felt like we could have hosted. We had some injuries. So we knew we had to go on the road. We adopted that mentality probably midway through the year. It was like, okay, whether we host or not, we're going to be emotionally ready.

Very proud of our kids. They all stepped up. I thought Clara was tremendous, 18 and 15, really manned the paint. Teonni with 19 and 10 bounced back from a subpar game yesterday. I told both of them one day before practice in the preseason that they had the potential to be the best frontcourt in the country. Tonight they showed why they can be that.

They're tandem, both of them are 6'5", they're mobile. You saw Teonni bringing the ball down the floor, helping break the press. Clara did it a couple times. Then they can man the paint. So I was very proud of those kids.

Tonie really, she ran the show. She ran the show through the pressure, 40 minutes. She knew she wasn't coming out. She was going to face it. She's been facing it all year, and she's grown from it. When we play Texas, when we play Tennessee, when we play Ole Miss, all those games really help prepare her for this moment.

As well as we were playing this year -- we played at LSU on New Year's. That was a crowd. We beat them. We played Louisville at Louisville. We were able to win that game. We played at South Carolina with 18,000 screaming fans. So the kids were ready for this opportunity, and I thought they did a really good job of handling it when the runs went on. They did a tremendous job. Very proud of our kids.

Q. You knew they were going to bring pressure, West Virginia was. Did the pressure that they brought, anything unexpected? How do you think you handled it?

KENNY BROOKS: We knew, we knew that the pressure was coming. We knew that they were going to get some steals. They practice it every day. Their guards are tremendous. Defensively they understand how to play angles. They get to their spots. They're a nuisance on defense. So we knew we were going to turn it over.

I think we had maybe one or two live ball turnovers. We wanted to minimize that. You're not going to eliminate turnovers against a team that presses the whole game, who is committed to pressing. You want to minimize the live ball turnovers. If you throw the ball out of bounds, you can set your defenses better than throwing it away and allow them to get a layup.

As Tonie mentioned, we weren't perfect with it, but I thought we handled it pretty well, and I thought we got some shots out of it. It was a good tradeoff for us. I was very happy the way they kept their composure through the runs.

Q. They had kind of wrestled control of the game to end the first half. How did you come out hot to start the third there?

KENNY BROOKS: Well, you give them credit, it's a game of runs. I'd like to tell you we did something different than we just locked in. I thought we let it get away from us a little bit. Shaw was terrific. She kept them in it when we got some leads and she got some shots off. We did a really good job of just locking in.

We looked at them statistically, and they're a really good third quarter team. We knew that, and we paid attention to that. So we really locked in and came out getting us off to a good start.

I thought Asia Boone was tremendous in that third quarter. I don't even know what her stats were in that third quarter, but the look in her eye, it was kind of like she was in a zone, and you just don't talk to her. It was almost like she was pitching a no-hitter, and nobody was talking to her because she was just locked into what she was doing. I think she had two or three 3s in that third quarter, and that really helped us stretch it out.

It was good all around. I thought Clara was really good in that third quarter and gave us the lead. It got a little dicey in the fourth, but at this point in the season, it's survive and advance.

Q. Coach, over your two years at Kentucky, from time to time you've talked about being able to stop and smell the roses. Have you been able to do that, and is today, making the Sweet 16, is today a stop and smell the roses moment for you?

KENNY BROOKS: It is. I'm too old to be living life and not stopping and smelling the roses. With that mentality, I adopted it a couple years ago, and it's allowed me to enjoy moments like this even more so.

We're going to be prepared. We're going to be ready for the next opportunity, but you've got to really embrace it. I have a group of young women in that locker room that are so much fun to be around. They're great kids. They're very smart. I think they have like a 3.5. Not one of them has been late to a meeting yet. They tell the bus driver yes, sir, or thank you every time they get off the bus.

When you have a group like that and they're good at basketball, you'd better stop and smell the roses because you never know, and you want to make sure that you enjoy every second of it. That's what I'm doing with this group.

In two years -- not just the team, but my coaching staff. In two years, we got here in two years, and we were a missed shot away last year from going to the Sweet 16, then we were one point win this year going to the Sweet 16. We've been a ranked basketball team every week that we've been at Kentucky. That's a tribute to my staff, to the young people that we brought in, everybody believing in what we're trying to do.

To do this in two years, it's pretty remarkable. So heck, yeah, I'm going to sit back and smell the roses and really enjoy this because we've gotten so much support. That's one of the reasons why I came here. I wanted to come here to be on this stage. If it weren't for the guidance of Mitch Barnhart, I wouldn't be here. It was like, okay, we want something bigger. We want to be able to compete consistently.

The support that we get, it allows us to do so. As we move forward, we've got three McDonald's All-Americans coming in next year, and the trajectory of Kentucky women's basketball is on the rise. It's a testament to the hard work that our kids put in, but also my staff puts in.

Q. Coach, there were a couple times in the second half when you guys stretched your lead out to double digits. At one point it was 14, and you went to the fourth up 12. How did your team respond whenever WVU did cut back into that lead, especially in the fourth quarter?

KENNY BROOKS: Yeah, they did a really good job. I'll tell you, for the people out there, so you guys can write this, why I didn't take a timeout in that little run. I think we hit a shot that put it back to 6, I think it was, 6 or 8. If I had to call a timeout during the heat of that run, that would have been the media timeout at eight minutes, and I didn't think we could go eight straight minutes without a media timeout.

So we were trying to hold on. I think we got to that point at 5, we were up maybe 6 at the media timeout.

I'm really proud of the kids. They just had a different look on their face. Even when things look grim, they didn't say, okay, we're going to lose this game. It was more, okay, what do we have to do? When I came to the huddles, they were communicating about what do we need to do? What happened? It's a different feel.

We knew they had the capabilities of going on runs. When you play a team like West Virginia and they press so much

and they put so much pressure on you, they're capable of going on runs.

Ironically -- and I don't know why, maybe it's fate -- but I probably watched them play just randomly probably four or five times this year, just randomly. They just happened to be on when I'm watching. I saw the game against TCU here. Ironically, we all saw the Duke game. We were having dinner watching the Duke game. This is nothing against Duke, we love Duke, but my team is full of ACC people. So we're always competing against Duke.

The ones I brought from Virginia Tech, Teonni played at North Carolina, Tonie played at Georgia Tech. My assistant coaches, you know. We were all enamored with that game and the way that it happened, but the resiliency that they showed, West Virginia showed. It got to the point where they were like the darling, and we were rooting for them because they had all their players in the locker room and they had players who really hadn't played, and they hung on.

So we were definitely aware of them, their story, how good they were walking into this game. It was just -- it's just kind of like full circle that we had to play them coming down here. I'm very proud of our kids just the way they handled every second of everything that we've done this past week.

Q. For as tense and as close as this game was for as long as it was, it almost seemed surprising you had a 14-point lead. How did you build that margin? Then ultimately, how important is it to have that sort of cushion for as long as you did?

KENNY BROOKS: I thought we did it because we were executing. When things got a little dicey, we just dug in, and we executed. We hit some big shots. I think we outrebounded them 39-23. We had a couple of offensive rebounds during that stretch. We were able to -- they were almost like momentum killers because they would get a stop and we would get an offensive rebound and we would get a stick-back. We built that lead going in.

I knew fatigue was going to be a little bit of an issue because Tonie played 40 minutes, Clara played 39, and Amelia played 37. We knew it was going to be a little bit of a situation like that, but they dug in. The lead definitely helped us as we had a cushion going into the fourth.

Q. Just break down that final play where Gia Cooke gets the shot off that could have beaten you.

KENNY BROOKS: Tremendous shot. Basketball is such a -- it's a beautiful sport. It's a crazy sport. If you want to dig deep, if you look last year, we played against Kansas

State. We threw the ball inside, and we got the ball to our star player Georgia Amoore, and she took a floater, probably about a five or six-foot floater that danced around the rim and fell off, almost identical the way that Gia's shot danced off.

We looked at it, and when Georgia missed that shot, that's a shot that me and her work -- we warm up with, and she'll make 10 out of 10. That's just the way that basketball is. We put her in situations, she did a good job of creating some separation, and she got the shot up. The basketball gods have a funny way of just imposing their will. We were very fortunate that it didn't.

Kudos to Teonni, who had the wherewithal to get up and get the rebound to secure it, and that was big.

Q. Just trying to guard Shaw in the fourth quarter, just talk about how difficult that was for you guys.

KENNY BROOKS: I love Amelia Hassett. Amelia does wonderful things, but Shaw got loose a couple times. Give credit to the fans. 80 percent of the arenas that we play in, we would have been able to communicate a switch to where she wouldn't have got a wide open shot. It was so loud in here.

She got loose from Amelia one time, and it would have been a perfect opportunity for Asia Boone to switch out on it. They couldn't hear each other. They couldn't hear us.

Credit to Shaw, she's got a beautiful game. She shoots the basketball exceptionally well; she plays with pace. She really kept them in it and brought them back in that situation.

But give credit to the crowd. It was loud. We couldn't communicate in that situation. We were fortunate to be able to come through with that.

I also want to give a shout out to The Cranberry. That's the hotel we stayed at. If you have not been there, their hospitality in a very short amount of time to accommodate us was really good. They treated us very well.

Then The Tropics, I don't know if you've been to the tropics restaurant over there. Food was unbelievable. They kept us afloat. They really kept us afloat.

It's tough. I know it's tough when you have -- because I've been there, and you don't know if you're hosting. Then all of a sudden, we went to eat one night, and there was a Marriott. I'm like why aren't we staying there? I think there was some youth something going on there. But I really appreciate the hospitality. The Cranberry, they did a

tremendous job, and The Tropics restaurant. If you guys live in Morgantown and you haven't been to The Tropics, you need to get there. It's really good.

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