

2023 NCAA Women's Lacrosse Championship

Monday, May 22, 2023

Cary, North Carolina, USA

WakeMed Soccer Park

Denver Pioneers

Liza Kelly

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome once again to the 2023 NCAA Division I Women's Lacrosse Pre-Championship press conference. We are here today with Denver head coach, Liza Kelly.

Thank you, Coach, for joining us.

Coach, we'll start with you. What did it take to get to this point in the season? Any reflections on the season and what to expect this week in Cary?

LIZA KELLY: Yeah, a lot of hard work. A lot of belief in ourselves when maybe there were doubters elsewhere. I'm just super proud of the team and very excited to come down to Cary again.

Q. Just kind of generally, what has been put into this defensive unit, and how has it become the most dominant in the country?

LIZA KELLY: I would say a lot of belief has been put into. If you know, all the teams that we've had in the past, I don't know, maybe seven years have played kind of this style of defense out here, and each -- each team has been better and better. We've had some really terrific defenders in the past. Kate Fischer comes to mind, Molly Little.

But I think this team really just has eight individuals that are totally bought in and trust each other.

Q. Maybe take us back a little bit. It seems like your program has been culminate to go this stage over the last few years. Denver has had some very successful years in the past and obviously Boston College last year at the NCAA Tournament, but talk to us about what really separates this team right now, and also maybe all your fans wearing pink in the stands, as well.

LIZA KELLY: What separates this team, well, I think as

you're building a program, your goals change throughout the years. You start off just kind of wanting to get in and win a conference championship, and then you want to kind of compete at the next level in an NCAA game and win your first win and win your second one.

Right when we went to our first NCAA game, I remember talking to Bill Tierney saying, "We've got Jacksonville."

And he said, "Who do you have after Jacksonville?"

And I was like, "Ohhhh, okay," and that it clicked. It's not just who you have first; it's the line all the way through.

It was a really great way of just kind of rethinking about things of not necessarily plan to go win the first one, but how do you win the second one, how do you win the third game.

This is a team that has kind of grown up with those terms that understanding that we talk about winning a National Championship, not just winning a conference championship.

We talk about being a team that can compete with top five teams, not just with top ten teams, and so I think that kind of gradual change over time is really what's put us in position to be more successful this year.

Q. You mentioned playing this style of defense for, I think you just said, seven years. If you could shed some more light on the origins of it and how you implemented it and how it's evolved over that course of time.

LIZA KELLY: Yeah, for sure. So it is hot pink, and that is, so hot pink is the name of the defense, all of our defense at one point were wearing pink and we ran out of hot pink -- sorry. It's like singing the anthem, okay, not prepared for this.

So basically, how it evolved was that we had this great goalie, hand in a hook, and hand that was All-American for us, really unbelievable and we played more of a man-style defense and she could just gobble up alley shots.



Our next goalie that came in, Maddy Stevenson, we called her "Birdie" because she was this itty-bitty thing, and she struggled with those shots more and she struggled with anything inside. The defense really evolved to kind of set her up in ways that we felt like she could make just different shots.

I watched a ton of film, watched a lot of Stony Brook play, just different styles of zones. I've never been one even in a man to kind of want to sit back and let an attack kind of do what they want to do. We have always wanted to go and take the ball away.

And so hot pink just kind of evolved in terms of what's important to us, what shots do we want to take away, what opportunities are we okay kind of creating. And every year, we tweak it a little bit and it changes a little bit depending on who we play, as well, but it's just a really fun kind of high pressure, go out, make mistakes, but have each other's backs.

Q. I have two questions. So one is I covered a bit of DU's gymnastics run, and one thing we were talking about, you've been a coach for 17 years and I was talking to their coach about seeing the fan base and audience, especially, for women's college sports and gymnastics like really grow over the time that she had been there, and I'm curious if you have been seeing a similar phenomena or kind of what that has looked like for you. And then my other question is, our audience doesn't really cover the play-by-play of lacrosse but I think definitely is interested in this, and I'm curious what you would say to an every day person who doesn't know much about lacrosse. Like what they should keep their eye on? What they should know?

LIZA KELLY: Sure. I do think our fan base has grown. I think that Denver -- or the University of Denver has done a really good job of marketing its women's sports. This is the first year we sold tickets for our home games, and that's something that I've been pushing for for 17 years. A little miffed that it that long to do it, but I kind of keep telling everybody, if you build it, they will come, and we've had really packed stands.

So that's been awesome to see, especially with some top opponents coming out. We were so excited with D.C. last year and then it was the coldest day in the history of the world and we only played three quarters. That kind of affected our fan base a little bit.

And then the layman's terms, I usually tell people if they have not seen women's lacrosse before, I kind of compare men's lacrosse to ice hockey and women's lacrosse to

basketball. I tell people it's just basketball with a hundred yards and two more people at either end. I really think it's the same offense and defense principles, and even more fun because you get to run that much more with it.

Q. This feels like a classic amazing defense versus amazing offense. Obviously it's more to it than that but kind of in those terms, what threats does this great offense that you're facing, what unique threats do you have in front of you with that?

LIZA KELLY: Yeah, it's been really fun to watch Northwestern play. That's been kind of the hardest part of getting to the NCAAs is there's not as much lacrosse on and it's just fun to see and have access to so many games now. They have been exciting to watch. They are a powerhouse without question.

I think that their defense is great. Their draw team is great. They have got a great goalie. They are, you know, a well-earned No. 1 seed in my mind, and we are excited for the challenge. I think they move the ball well.

Against UNC this weekend, we saw a team that was kind of trying to move the ball from behind a little bit more. I anticipate Northwestern trying to go high with it rather than just getting locked if down low.

When you play a team that has seven threats on the field, you have to honor everybody.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for taking time out of your day. I know you're busy and I know you want to get to practice. Appreciate you being here. Have a good week of practice and safe travels. We'll see you in Cary.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports ...