

# 2023 NCAA Division II Women's Basketball Championship: Minnesota Duluth vs Ashland

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

## Minnesota Duluth Bulldogs

## Mandy Pearson

## Brooke Olson

## Maesyn Thiesen

### Finals Pregame Media Conference



**performance overall, and how will you use that heading into Saturday?**

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, I think that our momentum going into even the postseason was coming from a few of those games at the end of the season, and we just kind of started to find our stride toward the end and were picking up a few more wins.

I think that it is impacting how we're doing so far, and we're just using what we've discovered about ourselves in some of those late season wins to push ourselves far into the postseason.

BROOKE OLSON: I think this streak is a result of how well we're playing together right now. I think we're playing our best basketball, which is exactly the point in time of the season where we want to be playing our best basketball.

So it's really exciting, and so hopefully make it a 15-game winning streak, but I mean, whatever the result is, we're never just put down to one game of the season or even a streak. I think we're just really excited about all that we've accomplished and excited just to have one more game, and especially in this environment. It's just really great and really fun.

**Q. You guys mentioned that you wanted to be here from the beginning. Looking back at the season and everything that you guys have been through, how do you feel like you guys prepared to be here, now that you're actually here?**

BROOKE OLSON: I think it honestly it comes down to our game preparation. Our coaches do a great job of putting together a really detailed scouting report, making sure that we're prepared every single game that we go into.

But also I think it's our mentality. We have a really great group of 16 girls and we just love each other and we love spending time together and we love playing basketball together.

I think our goal is to just be -- our goal has been just to be playing as much basketball as we can and trying to extend

MANDY PEARSON: What an awesome time our team has been having so far in Dallas. Once we found out that we had made it here, they just wouldn't stop talking about Dallas and getting down here, and it definitely has exceeded the expectations. We're having a blast. We're really excited to be here. Can't wait for the game.

I know that I keep thinking we are actually going to play a game here at some point, but it's been an awesome week, and I know we're really excited to be here.

**Q. What has it been like the last couple days being here in Dallas? I know you've been so excited just talking with you guys all week, up until that grand exit that you guys had in Bulldog country just the other day?**

BROOKE OLSON: I think we're trying to soak it in. It's been an amazing 36 hours I think we've been here for. The event last night was incredible. The way the salute event went, it was awesome just to be with all the other women's basketball players here and being able to just like be within their presence was just really fun and uniting.

It just felt like everyone was included. So it's been fun. The food has been great, too, so that's been great.

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, it's been a fun time. We've had so many activities we've got to do as a team and with the other team. So it's been exciting to get down here and kind of live what we've been looking forward to, but it's been a tremendous time so far.

**Q. Do you believe that the team's 14-game winning streak for the rest of the season will help impact your**



the season as much as we can, too.

So I think we've been kind of holding on to that. Obviously this is our first National Championship appearance, it was our first Elite 8 appearance, too, and so I think we're using that newness to our advantage and really just trying to soak it in, be present, and hopefully just playing our best basketball on Saturday.

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, I think since the beginning of the season this has been our goal, but we also set a goal to have fun and get better every single day, and that's kind of what we've owned here at the end of the season.

Yeah, just those three things that we've been doing have helped us get this far.

**Q. When I spoke to you guys on Monday the focus was defense. As you guys are getting closer to the Saturday game, do you feel like the focus has still been on that area?**

BROOKE OLSON: Yeah, I definitely think that's our bread and butter. We can always kind of rely on the controllables, so that's rebounding, that's getting stops, and that's hustle plays.

So I think we're just really kind of honing in on what we can control because everything else we can't. I think we're hoping that we can go out there, hope shots fall, but even if they don't as well as we want them to, we can still rely on our defense and contain them as much as possible and know that we're going to be probably the most prepared team out there just because of our coaching staff and all the hard work that they've put in and that they will still put in in the next couple of days since we don't play for another two.

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, I think the same. We just kind of stuck to that for the end of the season. There had been times when we weren't scoring as well as we hoped, but then we could count on us getting a stop on the other end.

So I think that is one of our strengths in our team's game, so hopefully we can just hone in on that on Saturday.

**Q. Under your leadership the team has had much success over time, so what does it mean for you personally just based on them working for you hard and earning this spot to be here in Dallas?**

MANDY PEARSON: It's hard to put that in words. You just saw -- you just witnessed Maesyn and Brooke and how well spoken they are, but they are two of the toughest, most incredible leaders I've ever been around, and so

much of our success has come down to the stuff that they've been willing to do.

For me, seeing how happy they are and how much fun they're having while still competing at such a high level is probably one of the coolest things I've ever witnessed as a coach.

And the rest of the team, as well, not just those two. But they've obviously been here for five years, so it's been a nice run.

**Q. I know that you've taught these girls so many things and you hoped that they just take on so many life skills that you've taught them, but what do you think they've taught you in return, especially Maesyn and Brooke?**

MANDY PEARSON: It's funny, as you started that question, I know you're supposed to listen when somebody is speaking, but in my head I went, gosh, I wonder how many things they've taught me since they've been here. That was literally the first thought that I had.

So many things. Each person in this program has taught me something, and I think specifically to Brooke and Maesyn, those two, Maesyn's toughness is incredible. Just to see somebody that can continue to be that focused -- we were joking in the lobby. I don't know if you've seen her pinky, but it's like all messed up. She's played 40 minutes against pressing teams with her fingers all taped up and her hand looks a mess, and she's so incredibly tough and resilient that it's been phenomenal for me to watch that.

You learn so many things through even just that.

I'd say the biggest thing in the past few years is this group has allowed me to be myself. Like I've said that a few times, where I can walk into the gym and be myself and walk in having fun and joking around with them, and they can flip a switch when we need to get down to business and get better.

So that's been just learning how to navigate that, where I think when I first started coaching it was I have to be tough and I have to be this personality and I have to do this so that we're successful, and realistically I've learned the most through this group that I can be myself and enjoy the process, too, and we can still get a lot of good reps in on a lot of work done on the court.

**Q. As you have dug into the tape, what are some of the ways that you feel like you guys can attack Ashland offensively, particularly if they really throw a lot of people down at Brooke?**

MANDY PEARSON: I mean, like you said, it's going to depend on what they do. We've worked a ton on relocating. We've worked on some cutting actions. We've worked on some different ways to enter the ball to the post.

But I think the greatest strength of our offense is we move the ball really well, and our players have learned how not to force things.

I'm really hopeful that as the game goes on that our players can make some in-game adjustments right away that can allow us to find the open person, however it is that they're going to attack us.

So, I mean, the motion offense that we run should hopefully - fingers crossed - allow us to make some great reads and get some open looks.

**Q. A lot of attention on your team for Brooke Olson, and rightfully so; she's earned all of that. But I was wondering if you could talk about the rest of your team, about the people who don't get the same recognition, what they mean to the Bulldogs as a whole.**

MANDY PEARSON: Where do I even start? I could talk about all 16 of them and I think we'd be here all night. You look at Maesyn and just her IQ. She's our coach on the floor. It's funny, I'll text her and Madelyn Granica. Those two are so incredibly intelligent and they pay so much attention, and they just study like the scouting reports like they're studying for the biggest test of their life.

I was texting them yesterday because it's like, okay, what new sets did I put in, and then I can't remember the name of this one, and they remember all of those things.

So I have some people that are really paying attention to the stuff that we're doing, is one of those things.

Kaylee Nelson never gets enough credit for what she does on the court because she's not going to score 20 points. Maybe she will on Saturday, and that would be amazing, but she takes really good shots and she makes the right play. She doesn't force things.

Offensively she's kind of that quiet, intelligent, move-the-ball player that will catch and shoot at the right times, but defensively she is locked in and does a great job of communicating, being in the right spot. She's rarely out of position. She's really active, and we get a ton out of her from that standpoint.

Taytum Rhoades is an amazing playmaker where she will

-- she might be a little bit quiet and then all of a sudden she's going to go on an offensive run or she's going to get a huge jump ball or defensively we can put her on a different matchup and she can do some great things on both ends of the floor.

She's a good passer. She's just a really good all-around player that is -- she knows how to make plays at the right time, as well.

Then you see Ella Gilbertson, Taya Hakamaki. They come off the bench, they're both incredible scorers and have made some huge impacts for us on the defensive side. When we put them in we don't miss a beat with our substitutions.

What Lexi Karge comes off the bench, and as a freshman this year she's made incredible improvements in her game. Like she has a huge upside, and she just keeps getting better and better. I don't know who I'm missing. That's kind of our top eight or nine that are playing.

Then we've got some awesome people who don't get in the games and apparently keep telling me to look down the sideline because they've got some great celebration dances and things. I don't think I'm going to remember to do that. They told me that a couple days ago.

But their energy, their support, it's incredible to be a part of a team that has all 16 completely invested. There are times when I'll see a picture of our team in a team huddle. Most of the time all of them are paying attention to what's being said, and when they leave that huddle they're high fiving, they're excited for each other.

So it's just an all-around really good group effort. Really good group to be a part of.

**Q. You mentioned being yourself earlier. How do you feel like the personality of the team affects the work ethic this year?**

MANDY PEARSON: They're relentless. The energy is great, and I do think there has to be some sort of a correlation when people are having fun and they have high work ethic that there has to be something with success in that.

All of them are competitive. Brooke Olson's little sister is redshirting this year, and her and Brooke just go at it at practice sometimes. It's hilarious, but they compete, and I don't think you get to this level in any sport if you're not super competitive.

I mean, the energy is awesome and they compete. And

they can get after it at practice, but then when they leave the court they can be friends again. Or even just drill by drill they can get after it a little bit and then make up and get better the next drill.

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