

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

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

Minnesota Duluth Bulldogs Coach Mandy Pearson Brooke Olson Maesyn Thiesen

Finals Postgame Media Conference

Ashland 78, Minnesota Duluth 67

MANDY PEARSON: Like I just told them in the locker room, it's really, really difficult for me to put into words what this season has been like and how amazing this team is. Like you can't even describe it because they're phenomenal people. They work incredibly hard, and as you saw tonight, they never give up.

I think when there was four seconds left was the first time that I really saw them hang their shoulders, and that is absolutely incredible. That's what happens when you have two leaders like Maesyn and Brooke. What they've meant to me personally, I'm speechless.

I don't know that I've ever been more proud of two people for what their five years looked like at UMD and what the world has gone through, through COVID and -- everybody was affected by that, I'm not making light of that. I think there were a lot of teams in the country that went into it and they came out weaker. We went into that, we went through our stuff, we were up and down, as everybody was, but we came out stronger.

And that's why I think we had such an incredible year. Their relentless resilience, just incredible, incredible humans.

So it has been a blast. Like I told them, this is one of those years -- coaches get tired and sometimes they're ready to have a week off, and this is one of those times where I'm tired. I think everybody is -- their bodies, I can't imagine. They're poor little girls -- I can't imagine. I look at what they go through and how much they fight and they're flying all over the place and they just get up and they keep going.



I don't remember what I was saying.

So I hit a point where I could have gone on for months and more months of this season because it has been fun, and they make it so enjoyable for me, it's ridiculous.

You have to say congratulations to Ashland. They are incredibly well coached. And I told that to her in the hotel lobby last night. If you make one mistake, they make you pay, and defensively they work just as hard as we do, and I don't say that about many people.

I thought tonight in the first half -- we talked about it a little bit with Ashland, you can't commit to one thing. You have to be really active and you have to make them uncomfortable, and I don't know that we did that enough defensively.

You saw what they -- they turned it up, and we did some really good things in the second half to make an incredible run back at them to give us at least some hope there at the end that we could make a comeback and win. But I mean, the offensive efficiency is just absolutely incredible with them, so that's congratulations to their team, to their staff. This is my first time meeting their staff and they're incredible people. Have to say congratulations.

Wish we would have come out with a W obviously, but the amount of pride that I have in these people is going to make this just a really fun season to remember.

People are going to be talking about what you guys did this year for a long time. And I'm almost done talking, I promise. But the last thing I'd say, I do feel like we've been watching women's basketball continue to grow and get better, and this event for our team was incredible. It was really, really well run. We were fan-girling over some of the Division I players that we saw, and coaches. For me, Dawn Staley, got to give her a shout-out.

But it was a wonderful experience. And so I think when we reflect on like Title IX and we talk about how women's basketball continues to progress, I told these young women, we grew up in a little bit of a hockey town, and I

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think they made people excited about women's basketball.

I think they're going to help our community jump in that area, as well. Congratulations, you two, on an awesome career. Sorry, I'm done talking now. I could go on forever, but I'm so proud of them. I don't have the right words, but two of the most amazing people I've ever been around in my life, and they're okay at basketball, too.

Q. Brooke, obviously not the outcome you wanted today, but can you reflect on the run that you have had, just this unprecedented run here in the tournament?

BROOKE OLSON: Yeah, we knew that coming in, Ashland is a really, really tough team. Obviously they finished undefeated, which is incredible, and they're really well-coached and they have a lot of different weapons. So we kind of knew that we had to play our best game, and we didn't do that for three quarters. You saw that in the fourth quarter, but we were always trying to play catch-up. It definitely doesn't feel good to get this far and come up short.

But like every single time that I try to be sad about the game, I'm always like, no, I just need to keep my head up because of just the season that we've had. This was supposed to be a rebuild year, and that's what people were saying about us during the preseason.

We never, ever believed that, and we just kind of put our heads down and worked. We loved being the underdogs. I don't think I'm ever going to be sad about the game or the experience that we've had. I'm just sad that it's over, sad that I'm never going to put on a Bulldogs jersey again. Just this season of my life is done.

That's probably the hardest part. But looking back, I'm going to probably remember this year more than anything. Just everyone, 1 through 16, like our coaches, our trainers, everyone has just been amazing.

Q. Maesyn, Coach talked a little bit about the Minnesota legacy of this, but playing for a Minnesota coach, one of 11 players from the state, can you just talk about how you think this resonates within a state where there's so much of a rich history of women's basketball and how much you think Minnesota itself helped create your team to where it was today?

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, I think that Minnesota has always had a pretty good history of basketball, and you've seen that in the past few years. We've had a lot of big-time players playing in a lot of big-time games coming from Minnesota. I just know that the whole state was behind us.

Lindsay Whalen tweeted Coach and said good luck. And all the schools and all the AAU programs, everyone was behind us. And we all played for different programs and different high school teams, but we knew when we came to Duluth that we were going to play together. And we got that great opportunity to play in Minnesota in some big arenas and big stages.

Yeah, basketball in Minnesota is awesome, and there's so much support even for the women. I don't think it is like that in every other state and every other place. Yeah, Minnesota really is a very good state to be a part of, and I'm glad we could just make a little mark on that in our time at Duluth.

Q. For both of you, was there any adjustment for you personally or as a team playing inside an arena this large? I don't know how much experience you guys have had in that in the past.

MAESYN THIESEN: Yeah, I would say just especially on offense when we were going to call a play, we needed to use hand signals or something that we could do that way, communicate that way because we weren't able to hear each other as much. So that was a little bit of an adjustment that we made.

Then just talking on defense, we had to do that a little bit more because of the size of the arena. In St. Joseph the arena was nice but not quite as big as this one. So it was a little bit of an adjustment on both ends of the floor, I thought.

BROOKE OLSON: Yeah, I think that was really the only adjustment. People say the depth perception behind the basket or whatever, but you just have to get into the hole. We didn't do that a lot today, and I don't think it was because of the arena. I think it was just because of Ashland's pressure and us not being in our flow.

But that was a great arena to play in. The floor is unbelievable. The NCAA has really done a great job here, and it's just great that we were playing on the same floor that the D-I teams were, too, on just a huge stage. And being able to be there last night and just having a sold-out crowd for the South Carolina-Iowa game and then to be able to go down and play today was an absolute pleasure, so that was a pretty good highlight.

Q. For Brooke, how did today compare among the most physical games that you've seen this season on the inside? How was it trying to maneuver down there?

BROOKE OLSON: Yeah, I didn't think I had the best mindset. I knew it was going to be physical and I let it get to me. Obviously I picked up three quick fouls so I wasn't able to give that same physicality back on defense. But I should have been expecting that. I should have gotten my head right and probably just more expecting that instead of reacting to it. I felt like I could have done a better job at that.

Q. What made Ashland kind of a difficult team to defend in the half court?

MAESYN THIESEN: Like Coach mentioned before, if we made a mistake they were capitalizing on it. We were a little bit undersized at the 4 position, so when they were getting the ball inside, we had to dig down a little bit or turn away from their shooters. They're so efficient that when we dug a little bit too hard or went a little bit further at their posts, then they were making threes on the outside.

I think that, yeah, they just capitalized on every single mistake that we made. And they have such good post presence and then they capitalized it with the shooters on the outside. I think just their all-around game was a little bit too much for us today.

Q. Brooke, we were told right before we walked in here that you broke the tournament scoring record. What does this tournament run mean to you, and what do you think was working so well for you in the last several games?

BROOKE OLSON: Man, that's a good question. I think it was just our team. Like we were all playing at the best -- at the peak of our, I think, careers. I think 1 through 16, we had so much energy, even from the bench, and I just felt like we were just gelling the whole time.

Sometimes that was me and my teammates being able to get me the ball in really, really great situations down low or even on the perimeter, too. And Coach just setting up really good spacing, as well.

I think it's because of her right here, too. I mean, she just willed us to win a lot of times, and she was able to just, like, calm us down, get us going, even when we thought that we were kind of counted out, too. Yeah, that's great.

Definitely wish that we could have ended on a W, too, to kind of cap that off, but still, our NCAA run was something that I'll always remember. It's not even the games, it's going to be like our student section storming our regional game. That's what I'm going to remember. I don't think I'm going to remember the scoring title or whatever. But it's just the run that we had and the history that we made and

the impact that we made on everyone that was kind of supporting us, too.

Q. I'm hoping you can reflect a little for me on your Minnesota-specific journey, to come from playing on the floor that Peps Neuman played on, to play, to coach, to etch your name in Minnesota basketball history, a place where Lindsay Whalen came from, where the Minnesota Lynx have had their success. Talk about how Minnesota has made you what you are today.

MANDY PEARSON: You did your research. You brought up Peps Neuman. We went to the same school and she was on -- what was the team she was on? She played, it's like a Harlem Globetrotter type of thing.

Yeah. The Arkansas Gems. She is fun. She's got a great personality. I don't know how old she was; she would still come back for alumni games and run up and down the floor. You've got to look for Peps at a Gopher basketball game. She's our hometown hero.

My journey in Minnesota has been incredible. It started at a young age for me at Eden Valley. I had some really good role models that treated me so well, and they got me really excited to play well. I actually just got a chance to tell that -- one of my biggest inspirations in my hometown, I got to tell her daughter that two summers ago, how impactful she was in my life, and it's been a journey.

Honestly, I didn't even -- when I was little, I didn't want to play basketball. My parents made me. When I was graduating from college, I didn't want to coach, and then I got a job offer. I don't know why.

But this sport has given me so much joy. It's allowed me to meet so many people, and when -- I was fan girl when Lindsay Whalen liked a tweet and then tweeted at us because what she's meant to basketball in our country and to Minnesota, it's incredible.

I have to give her a shout-out. My cousin's daughter was diagnosed -- this is a long time ago. She's doing really well, but she was diagnosed with liver cancer, and Lindsey Whalen sent her stuff because she found out she was a basketball fan.

I think it's not necessarily even the basketball that has been the most impactful, it's the inspiration that you get from the game and from those individuals that has impacted my life the most, throughout my entire career, including these two sitting up here and my team. I was walking around the last three weeks and I'd just see them and just start crying because they've inspired me. I've

learned so much from them. Yeah, it's been a really cool journey.

Q. Talk about the support from the alumni. I understand there's a lot of people in town, even from back to your Concordia days. How much did the Bulldog alumni play a role in getting the team to where they are now?

MANDY PEARSON: Our alumni are amazing, whether the ones that I've coached or the ones before I got there. Karen Stromme really connected me with a lot of her people early, so I was thrown into that. And I've got a group of -- I'm not going to give their age. I don't think they'd be mad at me. But they've asked to be involved, involved in mentoring and involved in having people to rely on and to connect with and when they're searching for jobs or internships or when they need advice. So that started right away when I got here.

I've been blessed to coach just the most incredible people in the entire world.

They were driving around in a car yelling at our bus today when we were driving around. And they come back to games, and they're texting me and they make me laugh. It's really easy to rip on me, but they go at me sometimes, and that relationship has been unbelievable for me.

But the impact that it has on our players with them always being around has given them so much pride in UMD.

Q. I just wanted to touch on a little bit more, you mentioned Title IX and the celebration. I know you got to go see some of the things. What has it felt like to be a part of this celebration and be on the March Madness stage and have all these women in the locker room with you and to just be seen in this 50th year?

MANDY PEARSON: I don't even know how to explain it. I'm past the point where I didn't have to fight for my opportunities to be involved in athletics as a female. I've been really trying to reflect on that and think about the people before me and ask some questions to a few people that I know about their process, et cetera.

To see my players geeking out in that display, I was crying there, too. Like every time I look at them, I'm so proud of them because they were just so happy. They were pointing at pictures on the wall and they were watching the videos and they running up to the screens to take pictures. And that display was really cool. I don't know if people can still see it, but if you haven't seen it, get out there.

I mean, I get to do this and I get to be around so many

amazing people because of Title IX. And I'm really thankful that so many people put in the work for me so I had a nice easy path to enjoyment in life. Thank you to all of you who have done something to make it so awesome for us.

Q. Brooke got in a little bit of foul trouble in the first half. How did her foul trouble impact your team in the first half?

MANDY PEARSON: You know, I thought today like our ball movement wasn't very good in general. So then when she got into that early foul trouble I think our ball movement maybe even got a little bit worse, which isn't always a thing because we spend so much looking for her. But then we got nervous and we were trying to take quick shots.

Brooke, she's the best player in the country, and I started saying that a couple years ago, that she might be the best player in the country.

When somebody that is that impactful and your team is used to relying on her for four quarters gets her third foul because her dumb coach put her back in too early and there was miscommunication on a set play and she wasn't supposed to be screening, but she didn't hear the set, it's hard. It's hard.

Our players responded well, and they still fought. You're going to get a ton of fighting out of them. But defensively inside, we didn't have the physicality when she was out to really do what we needed to to be successful.

Q. What were the challenges and advantages of having 10 days between the semifinals and the Finals?

MANDY PEARSON: I think it's something that our team has gotten used to because there's about a 10-day period between the NSIC tournament and the regional tournament. It wasn't new to us.

The challenge for me is trying to figure out how much do I beat them up and make them practice hard, just so that we can keep that energy up. But with this group, they're so mature that I knew they were going to get here and they were going to be ready. And there was nothing that I could do or nothing that I couldn't do that was -- they were going to be mentally ready to go.

It's hard because you want to just keep playing, but it's also good to rest their bodies a little bit, too. There's a lot of -- it's all over the place.

Q. What is it about Annie Roshak that makes her such a tough player and made her such a tough player to contain for your team today?

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MANDY PEARSON: There's so many parts to that question because she's really talented. Like she can really score inside. But what her teammates around her do make her really good. Because like we had a bunch of different things that we could potentially go into, and maybe that made us a little passive to start the game.

But if you double, she kicks it to the right person. If you dig, she's patient and she'll kick it. If you sit low side, she's going to bury you and go middle. If you sit high side, she's going to seal for lobs or they skip it to their three-point shooters. So just the things that they do, their coaching staff is really good. And so they're -- and those players almost always make the right read.

And so not only does her talent make her difficult to guard, but the way that her teammates move the basketball and make reads makes it really, really difficult. They do a good job. They pass better than most teams that we play against.

Q. How much in the fourth quarter did you allow your mind to go back to the Missouri Southern game, if at all, the way that you climbed back from high teens, low teens, nine, eight, seven? How much did you allow yourself to compare those two games?

MANDY PEARSON: I don't think I was comparing them, but it gave me confidence because I knew they weren't going to give up and they were going to fight until that buzzer rang. I think our players had confidence. The only time that it came up was when Ryan, my assistant said something in one of the time-outs, that we've been here before, we've done this before. But my brain didn't go there. I just felt like we could do it.

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