

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

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

Ashland Eagles

Coach Kari Pickens

Hayley Smith

Annie Roshak

Zoe Miller

Finals Postgame Media Conference



Ashland 78, Minnesota Duluth 67

KARI PICKENS: I know I've said it before, but I genuinely believe this team was hand-picked, and we could not have done it without the selflessness of each and every single person. The girls asked me on my way over here, what championship has been my favorite to be a part of. And no offense to the other ones because I loved the other teams, as well, but this team has been so incredibly special to me for their selflessness and how much they came together, that this one tops the cake for me.

It's a great group, and I'm really thankful that I had the privilege to coach them.

Q. Zoe, what's it like winning a National Championship as a transfer. And then Hayley, you're new to this team, it's your sophomore year. What's that been like? Annie, you're a senior, so it's kind of like closing everything out.

ZOE MILLER: It's been so fun. I mean, this group of girls, they're amazing. I wouldn't have wanted to do it with anyone else. And I mean, we just love each other so much. I've never played with a team that loves each other so much, and we just do that.

HAYLEY SMITH: Coming into this year, we had a lot of new faces, and so I feel like that could have gone one of two ways. And we chose the right way, obviously, and that was just such a cool experience to be a part of.

Ashland has grown so much, and seeing that growth like

pay off today, I have no words. It's just been an awesome experience.

ANNIE ROSHAK: Yeah, I think this team is just so special. Like both of them said, to see the way that we've come together and to see the way we love each other, a National Championship, it means so much. But I think the relationships that I have with these girls is what's going to -- yeah, I'm going to have with me forever, and I'm so thankful for them.

I just pray that we were a light and people saw something different in us, and yeah.

Q. Hayley, a lot of teams today struggled shooting inside the arena. You guys are not one of them. Was there anything that gave you guys kind of an advantage today in this environment?

HAYLEY SMITH: I would for sure say that, one, our team gets in the gym a ton. They are the hardest workers that I know, which definitely pays off down the stretch.

I think that we stuck to how we play. Getting the ball inside and out and taking high-percentage shots is how we play, and we know that works for us. So I think we did that really well today.

Q. Annie, what were you guys able to do differently in that second quarter to really go on that explosive run before halftime?

ANNIE ROSHAK: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think we got a lot of inside touches, and we pushed the ball well. I think the whole game we stuck to what we wanted to do really well. We got a little sped up in the third and fourth quarters. But yeah, that second quarter run was huge for us, that momentum going into halftime and then just being able to have that big of a lead.

Credit to Duluth, they cut it, and they've done that multiple times this season, so we knew that nothing was ever too comfortable.

But yeah, I think that just sticking to our principles is what

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really helped us on that run.

Q. It seems like you guys really had your way in the lane. Did you guys think going into this that you had an advantage on the inside against this team?

ANNIE ROSHAK: You know, I think this was one of the first games all year that we didn't get doubled or tripled. We practiced a ton on this past week of just going at them, going at it one-on-one. They played a little differently, they were so active behind us and that stuff.

Yeah, huge credit to our coaches. They got us ready for what was going to happen, and our guards did a great job of getting it into us. And credit to these two, they finished really well, and I'm really proud of them just seeing all the work that they put in day after day.

Q. What does it mean to you guys to be a part of Kari's third championship, help secure that for her, and what you've brought to the history of this program this year?

ZOE MILLER: Playing for Coach P is so special. I love her to death. I mean, I look up to her so much. She's an awesome person, and I would say she puts so much work into our team. So winning for her is just, I mean, amazing. It just makes us all feel so good.

ANNIE ROSHAK: If I can add to that, I wouldn't be the person or the player I am without Coach P. So huge credit to her. I'm so grateful that we were able to do this. That's a pretty amazing accomplishment, to do it as a player, as an assistant, as a head coach.

She's never going to say that. She's going to deflect it back to us, which is another thing that's super cool about her, the way that she loves us. There's nobody else I'd rather play for.

HAYLEY SMITH: I agree with all of them, of course. And I can't really put it into words, but the way that Coach P has influenced my life and I'm sure my teammates', not only on the court but off. Just seeing a strong woman, her and her family, and how she just carries herself as such an inspiration as a young female, and I will never thank her enough for that.

Just the way that she's helped me in my faith, as well, you don't find it other places. You will never find a coaching staff or a head coach like we have here.

I'm so thankful to be a part of a team with her leading it.

Q. What were you guys doing as a team to create

opportunities for you on the interior, and how did you feel like you responded to the physicality of this game, both when Brooke Olson was in and not in this game?

ANNIE ROSHAK: Yeah, I think the flow of our offense gives us really good opportunities. We have just kind of that roll rise where one of us is always inside and the guards do a great job of looking for us, we do a great job of looking for each other. And we faced a lot of different defenses all year, and so just being confident in whatever was going to be thrown at us, I think, was the biggest thing.

Huge credit to Duluth; they played really hard, and they are a really good team. Just going up against them, I think continuing to do what we do and having confidence in that was really what led us today.

Q. Talk about the game that Annie had as the most outstanding player of this tournament, going against the national Player of the Year.

KARI PICKENS: Annie is a remarkable basketball player. I'm really proud of her because she was on a team where we asked her to pretty much score 14 points a game, and that that was going to be what we needed from her, even though I think she's capable of scoring even more than that. But what was going to be best for this team was a well-rounded team.

Today she took six shots, and she had 20 points. I think it's just a testament to she was going to do whatever the team needed, and today was no different from that throughout the entire year.

On top of it, 13 rebounds. She played fearlessly. She played like a senior, who I'm very thankful has a graduate year left to come back for, but she played like someone who wanted to go out and make a mark today.

Q. Today you pretty much put your name down in history as a coach, an assistant, and a player to win a championship. When the buzzer went off, what was going through your head?

KARI PICKENS: Honestly, the phrase that just keeps coming through my head is God is good all the time. Coming into this game, even if we lost, I just kept thinking, God is still good.

That is what went through my head. I had a total peace that whatever was going to happen today, my life is not defined by wins and losses, my life is not defined by championships. It's defined by my faith.

This is a really cool thing that I'm thankful that I got to

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experience with this team, but I'm never going to let it be the thing that defines who I am.

Q. Shutting down Brooke Olson early and getting her into foul trouble must have been a crucial part of the game. Did you guys game plan for that?

KARI PICKENS: Absolutely. Brooke Olson is an incredible basketball player, and she's going to have a heck of a professional career if she decides to pursue that. With that being said, we knew we had to double her. Their guards' three-point percentage was one that we felt like we had to play the numbers game, and we had -- we were going to let them shoot from three in order to try to double her a little bit more.

I thought in the first half especially that paid off. In the second half, Brooke Olson played like the national Player of the Year. She got a ton of huge O-boards and put backs. She had a step-back three that was remarkable. She's a very, very good player. They're a very well-coached team. However, I was very proud of our girls' execution, especially in that first half on her.

Q. It's been 10 days since you played the semifinal. Were there any challenges for that? And also what were you able to do to kind of keep them focused on this, and is this something you'd like to see going forward, the same type of a schedule to keep all the championship games at one place?

KARI PICKENS: Yeah, so the first part of how to keep them really -- the 10 days was really nice for a few of my players to get healthy. My starting point guard, who had been out for a majority of the tournament due to a strained hamstring, had 10 more days to get healthy, and she played outstanding tonight. So I was really thankful to have those 10 days.

Normally I don't love 10 days in between, but having just gone through this experience, it was well worth it. The NCAA did an incredible job of making it feel really, really special, of making it an absolutely first-class experience.

So yes, to answer the second question, I would absolutely want to see it continue because this team had -- any National Championship is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, don't get me wrong. This was even more so, like we were in a suite watching Final Four games. We get to do it again tomorrow.

We got to stand shoulder to shoulder with Caitlin Clark and Kim Mulkey and Dawn Staley, and I'm not going to lie, I was kind of fan-girling at the salute when I got to be beside that. So absolutely, that was a tremendous experience

and NCAA did an incredible job, and it would be great for our sport if that were to continue.

Q. I believe it was on Thursday that you mentioned specifically watching tape of UMD's regional final game against Missouri Southern State and their comeback from 20-plus points down in the second half. At what point in the fourth quarter did you allow yourself to jump back to that tape, and what steps did you take to prevent that from happening again?

KARI PICKENS: I'll be honest, I jumped back to that at halftime. That picture was very large and looming in my head. And the thing that we continue to talk about with our team is that we have to be the aggressor. That's one thing we really learned in our Glenville State game. We got up by 19, and then it was almost like we were trying to play safe, and we let them cut it to two.

Again, I want to give a ton of credit to Duluth; they play so hard, and they really had us rattled there in the fourth quarter.

But what we talked about the entire second half was that we have to be the aggressor. There was one time where Hallie was dribbling down off the press and she pulled a three, and in my gut, I was like, wow, that's a fast shot, but it went in. I think they very much had the mentality of we are going to continue to stay aggressive. That's a shot she would normally take in the game. So she let it fly, and it really helped cushion the lead a little bit more.

Q. What's the biggest obstacles your team had to overcome to achieve this perfect season?

KARI PICKENS: I know I've talked about it a lot, but putting aside any selfish ambition to do what was best for the team. I probably sound like a broken record at this point, but we had 10 different players on a team who had started collegiately. We had at this point seven different players on our team who have been recognized as all-conference players at various institutions.

But each and every single one of them came here because they wanted to do what we did today. But that's not easy to do, to put aside that desire to be the one who's on the court at the end of the game, to be the starter.

I want kids who want to be able to do those things but not at the expense of what's best for the team. We had a team full of players who were willing to do that.

Q. From your days playing to coaching now, how have you seen women's basketball grow kind of nationally? I know that's been a big conversation this week.



KARI PICKENS: This weekend I think really opened my eyes to how much women's basketball has grown. And I am incredibly thankful to be a part of this sport, and I'm incredibly thankful for the pioneers who really kind of led the way in this. I'll admit there were a couple years ago where I was like, why should people play women's basketball on TV when it's a money-generating thing. Men draw more.

Someone once challenged me with, well, if you play the women's games, maybe they'll draw some revenue, too. You've got to play them. I feel like I've seen that take place in recent years. I've seen people commit to giving women's basketball airtime. The stat that the Louisville-Iowa game topped NBA views, I'm so pumped for these women because they've worked really hard. And to just have the opportunity, to have the opportunity to showcase their talents, I think we've come so far in that, and even for myself to recognize that.

I share that story. Almost a little embarrassed, but I think a lot of people kind of view that. I think we need to educate ourselves on let's give women the opportunity to showcase what they can do, and good things will happen.

Q. You've had a very positive locker room it seems. How important has that been to the success, and even having players leave it all on the line for the ones around them, even with injuries?

KARI PICKENS: Yeah, our locker room has been great, and I'm going to give our seniors a ton of credit for that. I think that a team's togetherness and a team's unity is very much dictated by your seniors, and my three seniors in Maddy Maloney, Sam Chable, and Hallie Hiedemann totally led the way in that all year.

I want to spotlight Sam Chable. I know I've talked about her story before, but I think it's so special. As a sophomore she started for us and had the school record for made threes in a game. She hasn't played hardly at all the last two years, but every single postseason meeting, she came in, and she said, Coach, whatever I need to do to win a National Championship, I want to do that.

When you have someone setting an example like that, it's really hard for others not to follow.

All the credit to our seniors in that.

Q. We saw your son Elijah running around the court with streamers. Seemed very natural. I'm wondering to what extent do you think all your championship experience has played a part in him being so

comfortable there, and how do you go about sharing moments like this with him?

KARI PICKENS: Yes, I'm really, really thankful my family got to be here. I couldn't do it without the army of support that I have to make it happen. My husband was able to come, my mother-in-law was able to come, my mom and dad are always there to help. Like I said, again, I know it sounds cliché, but an army of support that allows that to happen.

Elijah, this has been the time of his life. He doesn't care a hoot about basketball. I ask him if he wants to play basketball one day, and he's like, no, I want to run like daddy. My husband was a track athlete. Whatever he wants to do is great. But he's out there, he doesn't care one bit about basketball. He just loves the girls.

Every morning at breakfast, he gets up and gives them all a big hug. So I'm really thankful that I get to experience this with him because everyone tells me it goes fast, and I'm four years into him and it has gone really fast. So I'm thankful to be able to cherish these memories with him.

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