

2024 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Thursday, December 19, 2024

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC Yum! Center

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Dani Busboom Kelly

Charitie Luper

Payton Petersen

Sofia Maldonado Diaz

Semifinal Press Conference

Louisville - 3, Pittsburgh - 1

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Incredible match tonight. Pitt's an exceptional team, and they have players that you can do everything right and they still can take over the game. I was just so proud of the way our team played and battled and stuck with what we'd worked on this entire week.

Just the amount of trust we showed, not only in the team, but in ourselves, was pretty incredible. In between Games 2 and 3, we said it's going to take everybody to win. We might use you to serve. We might go 5-1. We might go back to the 6-2. Then DeBeer goes down, and we did not plan for that.

It just felt like everybody was so dialed in, we could have put anybody in and had the same outcome. Super proud and really unbelievable performance against maybe the best team in the country.

Q. Dani, you're down 7-2 in the second set and you call a timeout. What was the message there, and how well did your team respond?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: I don't really remember that specific timeout. It was probably something like if we -- we were getting so close to blocking balls and making digs, it's like they were touching our hands. It's like this is going to start to work, and these plays are going to start to connect. We've just got to continue to stick with what we do and trust it.

I know it's probably -- I thought we were slow at times. It was probably a little bit of that and a little bit of we've got to



play fast and match their athleticism, at least a little bit.

Q. Dani, Pitt outblocked you guys in the first two games that you played this season, but you guys outblocked them, I believe it was 12-4 today. Was that a point of emphasis for you guys as you prepared for this match?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It always is. I mean, honestly, whenever we play Pitt, we know we're going to have to block them to win. I didn't realize we got outblocked the first two times. That's probably why we didn't win. It's like we have to block some balls.

Cara came in starting Game 4, and she said, I promise I'm going to get two blocks in this set, and she did. I thought that kind of blew open that fourth set.

Q. Charitie, congratulations on this win. Can you talk about being able to battle through those four set points you guys faced in the third set and how that helped with the momentum going into the fourth set?

CHARITIE LUPER: Yeah, it's all about who wants it more. It really showed that we wanted it more, and we're never afraid to back away from a fight.

We've been in these pressure situations several times this year, as you probably remember, against UNI. I would say that probably helped us because we've been through it before and we know how it feels. We just never gave up. We took huge swings. We were never shying away from it. We were never wanting to tip the ball and give them easy balls to pick up.

So we just really trusted ourselves and we just went for it.

Q. How is DeBeer doing? Can you tell me anything that you know about what she's going through and what you guys are thinking about for Sunday?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: We don't really know yet. We'll see if it's severe or not, but if there's any inkling that she can play, she's the type of kid that's going to get out there and play. We won't know more until tomorrow.

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Q. Payton, as an injury substitute in a fairly important match, how do you manage to keep your emotions at bay, and how did you perform so well?

PAYTON PETERSEN: I think at first, when she went down, I was like, okay, she's going to be fine. She's going to get back up. I was like she's going to be okay. Then when it hit me like she's not going to come back, I wanted to do this for her.

She's meant so much to me, and for that to be her last game, I didn't want that to happen. When I got subbed in, these amazing people are always on the court cheering me up, giving me confidence. So the fact that I can lean on people just makes it so much better.

Coming into people that are giving me a lot of joy in the game. I think we have a lot of fun, and it just helps calm everything down. So that's what they were giving me.

Q. You guys obviously -- you have experience in the National Championship a couple years ago. How does that help going into Sunday's match, having that experience before?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Just the fact that we've been there and we know what to expect and we felt that pressure before, that's all going to help us. But if DeBeer's not back, there aren't that many players that played in that game, so we'll see.

I think this team just really understands what it takes, and I think being at home will definitely help us. I thought the crowd was huge tonight, and it kind of propelled us when things felt a little tight.

Q. Charitie and Sofia, I wonder if you could comment on what Payton did stepping in and under these pressures. Payton, I also wanted to ask you, as you had a unique perspective on the UNI match, as your mom is the coach, what did you draw from that?

PAYTON PETERSEN: From the UNI game, I will say it's a cool experience to play against your mom and your sister, but to be honest, I never want to do it again in the tournament. I don't know, it just felt weird.

Obviously I wanted us to win, but at the same time, you like know someone on the other side, and you know it's a season-ending game. So it was just a little weird, but I think obviously them pressuring us was added a little more weird stuff to it.

Obviously it helped us, and I joked with my mom, I was

like, yeah, when we won the Purdue game, I was like, yeah, you guys helped us win that game. So I think it's just a weird perspective, but I'm thankful for it.

CHARITIE LUPER: Before Payton had a win in, actually Dani had told her, she said, Payton, you have ice in your veins, and in my head, I'm like, hell yeah, she does. She just really stayed composed.

She didn't act her age. She acted like she was a senior today, just staying calm and knowing exactly what to do, and I'm just so proud of her.

SOFIA MALDONADO DIAZ: I want to say -- first, congrats. You played amazing. As you said, you can tell in her eyes, she was ready to play.

After injury from DeBeer, of course in our minds, it's like, okay, how is going to be the plan or anything. But I feel like everyone was ready, everyone was like trusting in each other a lot.

Of course some aces, like good plays help us a lot too.

Q. Sofia, you're headed to the Final Four. How do you feel?

SOFIA MALDONADO DIAZ: As I said in the last game, it was already amazing being in the Elite Eight. Going to the Final Four, this is my first tournament, so I'm here just to give it all.

I said earlier in the practice just enjoy this game. I really enjoyed it. I just love this team. I'm playing with them, and I really feel supported today. If we play like this in the final, we're winning it all.

Q. This question is for all of you. When an injury like that happens at such a key moment, it could rattle everything, right? What did you all say to each other? What did Coach say to all of you to sort of keep that momentum going? Because it almost felt like you played better.

CHARITIE LUPER: It was just so shocking that it was to the point where like we couldn't really say nothing, but like our eyes did all the talking. Like we looked at each other, and like we pretty much said I got you, I got you, I got you, we're doing this for DeBeer.

Without verbally saying things, I knew what everyone meant. That's how close we are, and that's just how close we play for each other. Like Payton said earlier, we know DeBeer wouldn't want to go out like this. We know she wants one more game. So we got this thing done for you.

PAYTON PETERSEN: I think the big thing is Dani always said you've got to trust it. No matter what happens, she even talked between sets that anyone on the bench can go in. You have to be ready to trust each other.

We talked about outteaming people, so that's what we really did tonight. Just outteaming people and trusting each other.

SOFIA MALDONADO DIAZ: I want to point out that PK, as soon as we walked out, she said there's another reason to win this match, for her. I feel like we won it for her too. I feel like that made us play harder.

Q. Dani, I wonder if you could explain how you were able to get Payton to leave her mom.

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: It was a tough battle, but I told Payton she could be special here and she could be a huge part of this program.

We didn't foresee a lot of playing time for her as a freshman, but we knew we needed to use this year to get her ready, and she's going to be a staple in this program. She's the type of player we need and develops really well here.

She's a high volleyball IQ, somebody who has a lot of confidence in themselves and exudes leadership. I saw all that in the recruiting process and sold her to join us.

Q. I wonder if both Coach and Charitie could answer this. You guys have had this pressure all season long of making the Final Four and being the hometown team, and now you've literally made it to the last match of the season. What does that mean to you that you've sort of dealt with that pressure and gotten this far?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: Sometimes that pressure is suffocating, and there were moments in the season that we were suffocated. This team really rose above that, and we had to put a lot of work in and a lot of honest conversations about what it's going to take to overcome that. So it wasn't without a lot of effort. It didn't just happen naturally. It was something that we did work with.

I also think that this city, one of my mentors, Don Hardin, he used to coach here -- I don't even know what years, way back in the day -- but I had dinner with him seven years ago. He reminded me right before the UNI game, I said that this city deserves a great volleyball team. I was reminded of that.

It's a great motivation to do that for more than just the athletic department, but for everybody here.

CHARITIE LUPER: I've just got to say one thing. This is for all the people who doubted us (laughter). I had to say it, I'm sorry. I had to say it.

But going off of yours, I think pressure is a good thing. I think, honestly, feeling nervous about that pressure is a good thing because it means you really love this sport and you really care for this sport.

So just having the Final Four and being here in Louisville, knowing our fans are going to be here, knowing that our family doesn't have to travel far unless they live far, it just means everything to all of us, to all of the girls on the team.

We just want to get it done for this city because they've had our back throughout this whole season. Whether we were up or whether we were down, they never left from our side. They were by our side the whole, entire time.

We really want to do for them, and we honestly wouldn't have won the game without them. They had a huge, huge factor in that win tonight.

Q. This question is for the players. The third set seemed awfully reminiscent of the Stanford set, Stanford third set. In a set like that, how much of an emotional letdown is there if you lose that set? How much of an emotional letdown is there in that following set? And how much of an uplift is that to win a set like that?

SOFIA MALDONADO DIAZ: I feel like of course it was in our heads, just keep playing hard. Even we were trying to -- at least me, I was trying to don't even look at the score. I wanted to just play hard, support each other. I was like ready to lit.

I was telling them, cover me, I'm hitting. I'm hitting. I'm hitting. I feel like those moments, the trust is the most important thing, and I feel like we did that.

Getting some good rounds in the serving, people coming in, serving tough, we got so many aces there. So that builds momentum, and that's why we need it.

CHARITIE LUPER: I would say, if we would have lost that third set, it definitely would have been heartbreaking just from all the hard work we had put into it just to come back because we were down by so much. If we were to have lost that one, it definitely would have been a little hard.

Since we did win it, I think it gave us a lot of momentum

going into the fourth set, like we just knew. We all just had that feeling, we all had that look that we were going to win this fourth set. We were not going to make this go five because we know how Pitt is in the fifth set. We know how we are in the fifth set as well, but it would have been a dogfight, an absolute dogfight.

I'm really glad that everyone who came in really stepped up and just pulled it out for us.

PAYTON PETERSEN: I just want to shout out DeBeer. In the third set, she was phenomenal. I felt like every time I was out there, it was just set DeBeer, just set DeBeer because she was going off.

I feel like if we lost that set, you can take it two ways. We were so close, just got to fix a few things. Or you can use it like, okay, we've got a few things to fix, and we can be on the other side of that.

Q. You played in front of some pretty large crowds this season, 22,000 sold-out crowd here at the KFC Yum! Center. Playing in front of sold-out crowds cheering for you, how does that impact the game and just kind of the emotions you feel with that?

SOFIA MALDONADO DIAZ: It impacts a lot. I feel like having them on our side or families there too, at least for me, it's really motivating. I feel like we play even harder knowing they're going to cheer for us.

There was one player in the timeout saying that too, like we have this city behind us and supporting us. Of course it's all we needed too. That was really motivating for everyone.

CHARITIE LUPER: Every single time I hear the crowd just behind me, just being so loud, like it literally pumps me up and makes me so hyped. It makes me want to get the kill, get an ace, like whatever it is. Hearing them just yell in this big arena is something I'll never forget. I'll never forget that moment. I'm just really blessed to have them.

PAYTON PETERSEN: I think today I've had a lot of chills just because it's like an unbelievable experience I've never experienced before. Just to like even when we were walking in the building, when we'd get a kill or we'd get an ace, like to have the crowd behind us, it was just like I had goose bumps every time.

Q. Dani, you played Penn State and Nebraska didn't win a set. How are you a different team than you were in September?

DANI BUSBOOM KELLY: We're clearly much improved.

As a coaching staff, we were talking about that just before the match, that we believe we're the most improved team in the country from the beginning of the year. I think we've had some players really step up and fill their roles to the fullest.

Just the fact that we can use everybody, and everybody feels really comfortable. We maybe made some mistakes with subbing early on or changing things, but we settled in. It took a while, but we figured out what works best for us, and that's what got us here.

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