

Women's Basketball Invitation Tournament: Belmont vs Villanova

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Belmont Bruins

Bart Brooks

Kendal Cheesman

Tuti Jones

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference

BART BROOKS: First, it's a thrill to be here. Any time you're playing this late in the season, it's a really cool thing, and we don't take that for granted. We are unbelievably grateful to the selection committee, and the welcome that we got last night at the hotel was awesome. I got to try on a NASCAR helmet. Never done that before. So checked that off my list. But it was really cool.

And I think our players, we're enjoying every second of this. We're excited about the opportunity to keep playing. We've talked really for the last month of the season that we are trying to make this last as long as possible because we really do -- I think we've got a special group and we love being around each other.

So these road trips don't feel like work. It's fun, and it's enjoyable, and this has been a great experience so far. We have an unbelievable test on our hands against Villanova. That's a really hard team to prep for on a quick turnaround, but we're excited it we get a chance to compete tomorrow and play in this tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Kendal, talk about what these extra two to three weeks means to be together with your teammates and your coaches, and what have you been able to take from that experience in terms of building even a stronger bond and maybe even something that will help the program moving forward?

KENDAL CHEESMAN: Yeah, I love this group. This is probably my favorite team I've ever been on, and you want the season to last as long as it can. I feel like it's a testament to the work we've put in all year but also just a blessing for us to, like Coach Bart said, go on these road



trips or play at home or whatever it may be any given night. I feel really lucky, and we just want to keep it going as long as we can.

TUTI JONES: Like she said, I love being around this group and it's just really easy to play with them. And like, obviously, we're together more than we're not. So, I mean, even things like team dinner, I love being around them, and just getting to play basketball with one another has always been fun.

THE MODERATOR: Give us your thoughts about getting to play in such an historic venue like Hinkle Fieldhouse, and what are your first impressions from just walking around, and seeing something that you'll be able to take with you for the rest of your lives?

KENDAL CHEESMAN: It's really exciting. I feel like when we all walked in, we kind of just took it in, and we were all looking forward to that moment.

So I think it will be really cool to get on the court and actually play tomorrow. So we're excited about it.

TUTI JONES: Yeah, it's nice to be in here. I like just looking up at the banners and seeing all the different things that are hanging around. Nice facility. I'm just grateful we get to play here.

THE MODERATOR: Talk a little bit about what it was like for you to go through the three games, and I know you had an unbelievably exciting game against Northern Arizona, but last year, the team came into the same event, didn't quite make it to Indianapolis.

So what kind of feelings do you guys have heading into this event where you've got four really great teams and you're playing for a championship?

KENDAL CHEESMAN: Yeah, I feel like this team is just super competitive, and we want to win. We don't want the season to be over. So all these teams that we're meeting in this tournament are really good, and we know that. We just prepare going into each game. We just want it to as long as long as we can, and so that's our mindset.



TUTI JONES: Yeah, I feel every game has been really competitive and it's been really fun. I know we have a lot of great teams here in Indianapolis. I'm just excited to play who's next and make it to the championship.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about the Missouri Valley Conference and how that helps you prepare and if there's anybody that you played or have seen in the Missouri Valley that kind of gives you a "that-reminds-me-of-them kind of moment.

KENDAL CHEESMAN: I feel like overall the Missouri Valley has a variety of different types of teams, whether it's fast paced or physical, and overall, just every team has gotten us prepared for the postseason.

I don't know about one singular team. But all of them really helped us on any given night. Each game has a life of its own. It's been a good season in that conference for us.

TUTI JONES: Yeah, the Missouri Valley is very competitive it's been fun playing that conference. I think we're definitely prepared to play who's next.

THE MODERATOR: Your program took another step this year with the ability to get to this point in the season after being in it a year ago. Talk about what that means to you and what you think the impact will be on the program moving forward.

BART BROOKS: Well, yeah, I think every team is a little bit different. Every season is unique. This was the first year in my life as a coach that we've ever been able to host a postseason game, and we got to host two of them.

It's a lot easier to win at home than it is on the road; I know that. I'm not sure we make the come back we made if we weren't in front of our fans and in our home against Northern Arizona.

So that was a unique thing for me as a coach. It's not lost on me that we did get two home games, and that's a big deal this time of year when you don't have travel in the mix and you can be present in your comfortable place.

Moving forward for our program, I think all of our players came to Belmont because they wanted to play in this kind of environment. They wanted to play in postseason tournament play, and I'm just thrilled that this group is able to do that.

This group probably deserves to play in this event and get to a Final Four here at the WBIT more than just about any group I've coached. So I'm excited and thrilled for them.

Q. I know the players talked about the MVC, and you typically schedule a really tough non-conference schedules which helps you go into conference, but how does the MVC schedule help you go into the postseason?

BART BROOKS: Well, I think the Missouri Valley is a really unique league, and it has a ton of styles. So we get to play against teams that are great in transition; teams that move the ball and play five-out pass-and-cut; teams that are heavy ball screen; teams that have two big guys and you have to be really good inside. We've played against all of that.

So, really, every team that we've played here in the postseason so far has had a lot of similarities to a team we played in our league. And I think that's given us a chance to maybe use some comparable game planning and things that we've seen and things that we need to work on and fix based on the last time we played a team that played in that similar style. I believe that that's the case again.

Villanova is a very unique team. When you think about quick turnaround preps, Villanova is probably the last team on my list I want to prep for in two or three days. But again, I think being able to play some of the teams in our league has probably helped us expedite that process, and we'll see tomorrow how that went.

THE MODERATOR: How about team-wise, coming into this game as far as personnel, do you have everybody available? Are are things you're working on still to get availability for someone? How are you heading into this semifinal game?

BART BROOKS: I think everyone in the country who is still playing is probably limping their way through the finish line at this point. We've got some banged up people. But we're all here. We're all hands on deck. Everyone is available until I find out otherwise today. Hopefully no accidents on the escalator.

But yeah, we're here and we're healthy and we're excited. I think our group has been -- we've been smart with taking care of our bodies down the stretch, and I think that's probably key to this run that we've been done.

So I feel good about our team physically going into tomorrow.

Q. Like every school, and especially mid-majors, you've lost some players to the portal. But Tuti Jones who at the end of the day for five years what does that say about her but also the program?

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

BART BROOKS: I think it's a unique situation nowadays. I think mid-major programs, I think we have all made a living of having veteran kids who have been in our programs for three or four years, and knew everything that we did inside and out and had a chance to compete with maybe some more talented teams down the stretch. I think that's been our recipe, and that's been harder to execute here at the last handful of years with the transfer portal.

And Tuti, obviously, she's a staple of our program. She's the program's heartbeat. She's been here through everything. I think she's almost been in as many games as I have at Belmont, which is wild to think about.

But the transfer portal is also a really good thing. Because I know we've gotten a lot of really good players out of the transfer portal, and you know, so I'm not complaining about it. We've lost a handful of players. But I think we've equally addressed it and maybe gotten better because of it, too.

I'm excited about the group that we got this year. We got a lot of old kids, like Tuti, who have been here. We got some old kids who haven't been here. But man, they are dependable and they are veterans, and I think any time you get to this point of the years are veterans are really important.

Q. The MVC is obviously real tough. A tough fight to the end there to see who was going to win the conference. Do you think in the future that the NCAA Tournament should be looking a little bit closer at the MVC for at-large bids?

BART BROOKS: Well, I think that's a challenge every year for mid-major conferences. I think there's multiple mid majors in a lot of leagues that are good enough to play and win games in the NCAA Tournament.

Unfortunately for us, us as an example, we played six quad one teams in our nonconference schedule, and only one of these games was a home game. So if you put other teams in that circumstance -- like we scheduled really hard. We were competitive in those games. But we got one of those at home, and that was a four point loss to Ohio State.

If you put other teams in that same predicament and say, Hey, you've got to win some games to be an at large team, that's really hard to do when you're where we are and you're not able to get home games like other programs do.

So I think there's a lot of mid-majors that are good enough that have the talent. It's just we've got to find ways, more ways to get opportunities to get these games that we can

win. You've got to beat at-large teams to be an at large team, and that's our mindset going into every season, and we didn't do the job. We didn't earn that this year. We had a chance but we did not earn that.

And so we, as a conference, we have to do a better job of finding games and winning some games against at large teams.

Q. Watching Villanova, watching you guys, both so good on both ends of the floor, offensively, defensively. It's going to be a close game tomorrow, probably down to the last possession, maybe the last two possessions. Quick turnaround to prep. How much time have you spent on special situations, and how much time will you spend maybe tomorrow in your shoot around?

BART BROOKS: Yeah, we do that a ton, and I think a lot of what we do, we've been working on it all year. You know, there's nothing that we are going to do that we haven't worked on, and we haven't shown probably a handful of things that we're prepared to do late game because we haven't been in the situation yet.

But that's a huge piece of this time of year, and I think, you know, you can over think a lot of this stuff. But for me, it's like so much about what are our players good at, what are they confident in, and then let them go make the plays.

I wish it was me figuring all this stuff out, but it's so much about our players, and, you know, we put them in the right position to make a play. And usually the good players and the best teams go make plays down the stretch and figure out a way to win. I'm excited about that opportunity.

So that's why I haven't slept for I don't know how many days because I'm miserable thinking about the late-game situation that is Coach Denise is going to be drawing up and us having to fix and guard and all the things.

It's awesome, though. That's why it's a fun tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Final question for you. Throughout the year, a team will go through different phases where you feel really good about the way you're playing; it doesn't matter who you play or where you play, you know you're going to get an unbelievable effort, and other times you may hit a lull and have to work through some things.

What phase is your team in right now that you've seen through these three games of the postseason playing teams that you haven't seen, as opposed to the familiarity of conference play?

BART BROOKS: I feel like we've been through all of those things you described in the last three games. I don't know if we played three quarters of worse basketball than we did against Northern Arizona, and then had a quarter of being absolutely brilliant.

That's kind of the beauty of this sport, I guess, in that just if you keep your head where your feet or, and you focus on what's in front of you and you continue to play the possession, and there's time on the clock and you keep playing, you've got a chance.

But man, I feel really good about where we are. I think we've piecemealed our way through some tough stretches this year. We lost four in a row in the middle of our conference play, and I don't know if that's ever happened to us, for sure since I've been here. That was a unique thing we had to overcome.

I think we are battle-tested. I think we've got a lot of resilience, and I think we probably just played our most complete game front to back our last time-out against James Madison against a really good team on the road, and I thought we played great on both sides of the ball. I'm hoping that we're going to ride that momentum, and excited about the opportunity.

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