

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Gonzaga vs Nebraska

Friday, March 18, 2022

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Gonzaga Bulldogs (Melody Kempton, Kayleigh Truong, Head coach Lisa Fortier

Media Conference

Gonzaga - 68, Nebraska - 55

THE MODERATOR: We will begin our press conference.

Q. I heard a lot of cheers in the locker room. Pretty exciting coming off that BYU win and now this one. You've got to feel like things are clicking for you guys, for both players.

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: For sure. We're super excited. Any time we get a chance to play postseason, especially in March Madness, it's an opportunity to continue playing with the group that I personally love.

So it's amazing to see that we were able to succeed tonight. A lot of emotions, especially obviously coming from a tough loss last year. We're hungry coming into this year.

MELODY KEMPTON: Yeah, Leigh said it. Coming off of that loss last year, we were already immediately after that to come back to the tournament. So we've been waiting for this moment for a while.

For all the seniors, you never know when your last game is going to be, so you want to celebrate every single one because the next one might be the last one. So you've got to keep celebrating because it's exciting to keep playing.

Q. Kayleigh, 20 points for you tonight. I believe that's a career high for you. What does it mean for you to do that in the NCAA Tournament?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: It truly means a lot being able to contribute to the team. I'm not really a big stats person, but whatever I need to do for my team, then I'm hoping that I show up. Shout out to them. They found me tonight. They were tough on the boards, gave us extra opportunities. I can't do anything without them.

Q. How are you feeling? Obviously pretty good. That looked like a pretty scary fall. Tell us about that and what happened.

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Yeah, just I got a hard head, I think. Got a little dizzy, obviously, hitting my head on the floor. After that, I -- Kendall was great helping me, keeping the symptoms away and stuff like that, just checking up on me.

Still a little painful, but I have a hard noggin. So I think I'll be good.

Q. We talked about last year and what this means in the context of winning the first round game and moving on.

MELODY KEMPTON: Like I said earlier, we were pretty frustrated with the loss last year. We had a better seed coming in and losing first round, no one ever wants to do that. You love to see the upsets unless you're the team that's getting upset.

So right after that, we were upset and ready to come back to the tournament and show what we can do. So we've been training for this moment all year. To have it come out the way we want it to felt great.

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Yeah, Mel pretty much covered it. One of the goals this year was obviously we love our seniors to death, and one thing we were going to do is I want it so bad for this group of seniors and this team in general. So coming off that loss, it feels really good to be sitting on the win column right now.

Q. For both of you guys, just a tenacious defensive performance. They had 16 points in the first quarter and then fewer points as the game went on. How did your defense get better throughout the game? And maybe what was the first quarter like just sorting each other out?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: They're a great offensive team, great team in general. They average, I believe, 90 points-ish throughout the whole season, so heavy offensive team.

One of our biggest focus was obviously defense, but as the game went through, we knew that basketball is about a game of runs. Just couldn't let them get going offensively because then they're going to get comfortable, possibly close the lead. So locked in on D.

MELODY KEMPTON: Like our assistant Jordan said, when we came into the locker room, we were the more veteran team out here. We had a game plan going in, and you try your best to your ability to do that in the first half, but you play the first half and things happen, and you learn more as you go.

So I think we were able to take that information we got in the first half and put it into effect in the second half and really lock in on those defensive efforts. I think that's why you see the defensive score get lower and lower and lower each time.

Q. For both players, you talked about your defense and Nebraska being a great offensive team. What did you think that you did? Did you bother them with your quickness? Did you just play good man and zone? Or what was it exactly? For both players, if you'd answer that.

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Our main focus was sticking together. We played great team defense. We weren't leaving anyone on an island, made sure that obviously their top scorer, Jaz Shelley, great offensive

player, obviously we can't play her one-on-one. So the main plan was to stick together, have each other's back, and just be in help side.

MELODY KEMPTON: Like Leigh said, we were playing together. I think just flying around, if they got past one of us, there was one helping out. There wasn't someone left open because, if you got beat, you were immediately running to the next person. I think that's just hard to play offense against because generally when you're beating someone, you're going at a pretty high speed, so you're expecting to make a pretty straight line pass, and when that's not available, it's tough.

Q. This is for Leigh. Did you and Lynne really show up in the same jersey and try to convince Lisa that you were the same player?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: I think Lynne made a mistake. We have little laundry loops, and my loops went missing, so I used Lynne's. It has No. 14 on it. So the loop went back to Lynne's locker, and she somehow ended up with my jersey. She put it on in practice, and I was like she's wearing my jersey today. But it wasn't on purpose. It was on accident. As soon as she put it on, she told me too. She was like I have your jersey on.

Q. I was watching you guys in warmups, and everybody was smiling a lot. I can see you felt pretty loose out there. Does that help attitude-wise coming into a big game like this?

KAYLEIGH TRUONG: Yeah, I think we're all just super grateful to be given the opportunity to be here. Not every team in the country can say they're playing postseason. And so I think with this team, we show really great gratitude, especially again with this opportunity to be here with each other and continuing to play basketball.

MELODY KEMPTON: I have to agree. I think we're all just very grateful, and we've got a great support system. The coaches have our backs. We have family that's flown down here to support us. We have the cheerleaders. The band is incredible. They're always cheering for us. So I think that makes it really easy to be grateful when you have so many people that are supporting you and are coming here and excited for you, it makes it really easy to be excited for the game.

LISA FORTIER: Really happy for our team. I thought they did a good job today. In the press conference, someone mentioned it was a battle of styles or a conflict of styles. I don't know if think of us as being an overly talented defensive team, but I know we focus on it a lot and I know they score a lot of points. I think they're eighth in the country in scoring. To hold them to 55, it's got to be close to a season low.

I thought we did a really nice job in the second half of defending the three-point line a lot better. The first half they got too many open looks. And I know that each of their bigs hit one in the second half, but it was much better than the 50 percent that they were shooting prior.

Then offensively, we talked as a team about just being a team that would figure it out because that's kind of how we operate, we being our staff and me. They mentioned that the team takes on the whatever of the coach, and I said, well, I don't know, guys. I don't know what my attitude is, but I know that we've just got to figure it out. It might be that we're getting layups. It might be that we're getting threes. And we're just going to figure it out partway through the game.

Just really proud of the defensive effort they had, but also that big third quarter when Nebraska made a push and our team responded. If you can do that consistently, then you're going to be a tough out every time.

Q. Same question about the contrast to last year, getting upset as a 5 and now coming in as a slight underdog and winning. What does that mean coach-wise and program-wise?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I think for the players it's more emotional. I think last year was emotional for all of us. I don't think -- we knew how good Belmont was, but it was a long, emotional year or two, you know what I mean? It was the first time back in the tournament after the COVID thing. I think it was just -- it felt like a low blow even though they outplayed us.

So today I think we're trying to stay steady, but I knew that it was bubbling under the surface, that our players really, really wanted to win the game. The good part, I think, about the 8-9 is you're evenly matched most often. It wasn't a situation where you were supposed to or not supposed to. I think everyone just thinks 8-9, I don't know. Toss it up and see who plays better that day.

They were very excited in the locker room. I think that you always are. Again, a different team than we had last year, but the players that were around and did experience it, I think are very, very much preferred this to what happened last year.

Q. After Leigh had to sit out the last couple minutes of the first half, she comes in, she gets two quick buckets and takes a big charge. What does it say about her that not only does she get back out on the floor but she doesn't shy away from her play style that led to that collision?

LISA FORTIER: She's tough. She is tough. I think that, if she stays down, I don't usually go out there really for anyone. Right? If they're going to bounce back up. But we don't have a lot of people who lay around for very long if they can't get back up, so usually as a coach you know. When Kayleigh's down for more than a second and doesn't pop up -- she takes a lot of charges. Her and Lynne take the most on our team. She sacrifices herself a lot.

So when she's down, there's always a little bit of a concern, and there's always a concern that it's going to be something that's going to keep her out. So we were kind of game planning for what we were going to do with her sister, who had one foul. If she was going to have to play the rest of the game out, how we were going to protect her a little bit as the point guard.

I talked to Leigh before the second half started and asked her if she was okay and she could go, and she was like yes. I didn't vocalize this, but we're going to run something for you right now and see how you do, and she scored right off the bat on the first possession. You could tell that she was fine and she was ready to go.

I think she's been very quietly focused on all those things that she said. I think she carries a lot for our team, and last year didn't go how she wanted it to. I think of all the people she's probably carrying that more than anyone. I think she was trying to find anything she could do positively for the team today, and I'm just glad she was able to come back.

Q. I know you pride yourself on team defense and a balanced team. Their star player got in foul trouble, and it seemed to affect things a little bit. You talk about just not having to rely on any one player.

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, Leigh is always one of them. Mel is always one of them. Vonny's always one of them. Ana is not always one who scores 10 points. We have five players who average almost 10 points a game. Ana is not one of those people, and she has 10 today. So it shows you that we can get contributions. Lynne is one of those people, and she had zero points today.

I love coaching a team with multiple options. As a coach who scouts, you can't find people to help off of when you're in a pickle. You have to find a different way to guard. I think that that is our team. You can try, and people do. Some people try to double. Some people try to take away the interior and take away the perimeter, but we're just so unselfish and we're so skilled at all the different positions, that it makes my job really easy when I say run the offense, make the reads.

We're talking about making reads, not hiding players who can't score. So they're a fun group to coach in that regard.

Q. Piggy-backing off of that, when you have a player who just seems to have a hot hand, like Leigh does, shoots better than 50 percent, do you find yourself running more sets for her or trying to get her the open shot or telling her, hey, don't be afraid to shoot it? Or is that something that she just kind of took upon herself?

LISA FORTIER: Yeah, I think in years past we've done that a little bit more. We've tried to direct it. But when it's a point guard or a person who's handling the ball a lot, the ball comes back to their hand often.

So when they're shooting too much with too much direction or too early, then I think that they're doing it out of rhythm. So with both Truongs I don't think we have to do very much. The ball just seems to find them. They're good at coming back to it. They're good at finding the teammate who's open, but then they often draw help. So we do a little bit, but I think when the ball's in one of their hands, they tend to find each other pretty well.

I know one of them skipped it to the other one across the way when there was a denial on some position. They do have a knack for that. But I think organically it happens most of the time within our offense because we do run a lot of continuity and we are so good at making that extra pass.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about just what Melody brings to your team? She's so consistent. It seems like every time today you went to her, she found a way to score, 14 points, 8 rebounds. Just what she's meant consistency-wise to this team, both this year and just her whole career.

LISA FORTIER: If we had some sort of award that was for the steady player -- and we've had a lot of them over the years. One or two each year, it seems like, who's kind of always in the right place at the right time, but that's not an accident, right? Making the next right play, that's not an accident. Just showing up and consistently running and consistently guarding and consistently talking, then we would probably name it after her.

That's quite a testament to her because, again, I can think back through my time at Gonzaga and think of many players who each year -- they're not the glue guy or the glue woman, whatever you want to call it, but they're that person who's just consistently available and giving their best effort. You can't tell the difference on her. I can't tell to look at her if she needs a sub or not. She just does the right thing all the time.

Again, I'm talking about all these things that are fun to coach. This is a fun group of players. So we really are lucky to have people who do the things like Kayleigh who makes the extra pass, and Mel who just will run until she cannot run anymore. We haven't gotten to that place yet. So I think she can go forever maybe, I'm not sure.

It really steadies the team, I think, when you have a couple players out there who aren't going to try to play outside of themselves. They're going to do what they do and they're going to practice and do it at a high level, and they're going to do it every possession.

Q. Coach, you mentioned Lynne tonight with no points. Abby hit one three. I know she was doing some things on defense. What does it say about your team when you have players who may be having a bit of an off night -- I noticed in Lynne's case she still dished out six assists. To be able to affect the game in more ways than scoring.

LISA FORTIER: We just tell them, some people believe firmly, if you miss a couple shots, you have to get to the rim or get to the free-throw line or whatever. There's three parts, main parts of the game. You've got offense, and a lot of times people look at that as scoring. You have defense, and you have rebounding. You have to be able to do something that's positive for our team in order to stay out there. That's just how it works.

Lynne was a good ball mover. Obviously, she played a little bit more with Leigh being out and unavailable to us. She was a good ball mover. She drew defense to her. Abby was the main defender on Shelley, and she chased her everywhere she could and had that hand up the whole time.

Again, those guys can impact us positively without scoring, and they did it -- I think Lynne did it with running good offense and assists. She played good defense too, I think. She wasn't necessarily on the best player. Abby did it today with defense. You can't have five people on the floor who are trying desperately to score every time. That doesn't work very well.

So I just appreciate that, even within a season or in a game, the roles kind of shift. It's not like Lynne's only role for us is to score, right? Or Abby's only role is to guard. She also rebounds and does other things and can score.

I like that they're appreciative of the fact that, all right, this game, this isn't going perfectly for me. What else can I do for my team?