

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: Iowa vs South Carolina

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

Iowa Hawkeyes

Lisa Bluder

Caitlin Clark

Monika Czinano

McKenna Warnock

Semi-Finals Postgame Media Conference



CAITLIN CLARK: I thought it was a tremendous game for women's basketball. The crowd was incredible. Shoutout to all the Hawks fans that have traveled down to Dallas. They were so amazing and so loud and so fun. I don't think we'd be at this point in the season if it wasn't for them. I truly mean that. I know so many tuned in.

I think just tonight showed how fun women's basketball is. Two really great teams that went at it. I'm sure so many people wish this was a series of seven games. That would be really, really fun.

I think, if we continued the series, it might go one way or the other every single time. But obviously we'd get outrebounded by quite a bit, but we didn't hang our heads. That's all you could do. We gave up some O boards. We fouled when we didn't need to. We just came together and said next-play mentality, and that's all you can do really.

MONIKA CZINANO: I think that's a tremendous compliment coming from Coach Staley. All the credit goes to my teammates. They find me in positions that I am the most effective, and they do it game in and game out all the time. The confidence they have in me is quite unreal truly.

I'm just so proud to be on this team, yeah.

Q. So Caitlin, you've talked a lot about trust in the past. How did that come into play tonight?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think the biggest thing is knowing how much my teammates trust me. I was given the ball in kind of the biggest moments of the game on the biggest stage, but also at the same time, my teammates really came through and played huge minutes.

I thought Addy and Hannah Stuelke were tremendous off the bench. That's a hard position to come in when Mon gets fouls, Hannah leaks out for an easy two, Addy comes in and gets two buckets for us. And McKenna gets knocked in the head pretty well and gets the biggest O board of the game.

I understand South Carolina got 25 O boards, but there

Iowa - 77, South Carolina - 73

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Division I semifinal Game 2 post-game press conference featuring the Iowa Hawkeyes. We'll hear an opening statement from Coach and follow up with the student-athletes.

Coach, when you're ready, we would love to hear your opening statement.

LISA BLUDER: First off, I just want to say, South Carolina, unbelievable basketball team. I'm so proud of my women because I think they're the only people that really believed. I don't think anybody else, unless you were in black and gold, believed that we were going to win that game.

So the women in that circle, they believed, and we prepared all week as if we were going to win this game.

Before I turn it over to the women, I just want to put my condolences to everybody in Iowa City. We had some really bad tornadoes go through there this afternoon, a lot of damage. I don't know if anybody's hurt, but certainly we're thinking about everybody back home.

Q. Caitlin and Monika, what was it like to be part of this game and know how much attention it was? And did it live up to your own expectations? Monika, Dawn said she thought you were actually the difference maker, by Caitlin being able to get you down inside. How much did you come into the game knowing that was going to be a factor?



was one that mattered the most, and that was McKenna Warnock's, and that sealed the deal for us, and we were able to make free throws.

I might score the most points, but at the end of the day, we're aren't anywhere without my teammates. Gabbie Marshall doesn't score tonight, but she was outstanding. Zia Cooke is a tremendous, tremendous player. She was all over her and never got discouraged. She comes away with three steals.

Everybody did their role. That's what our team is about. Knowing your role, doing your role, and showing up in that every single day.

Q. McKenna, what was going through your head when you got that offensive rebound with less than 30 seconds left?

McKENNA WARNOCK: Just get it to Caitlin honestly. But obviously we always want to get those O boards, and I'm glad I could come up with that one. It kind of fell in my lap. That's what we wanted in those moments, we wanted some of those to bounce our way.

I'm glad it did in that moment, and I'm glad Caitlin knocked those free throws down.

Q. Monika, how were you able to get free from all their size and their mobility?

MONIKA CZINANO: I think it was really coming out of the paint. I couldn't really do what I normally did and just post-up down there. I had to come out and set ball screens and try to expose the screen and roll, and I think that worked out pretty well for us.

Q. Caitlin, when the buzzer went off, you threw the ball up in the air and just started celebrating. What was going through your mind during that knowing you're going to go play for a National Championship?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think I'm just really, really thankful to be in this position more than anything. Like Coach Bluder said, probably everybody in America picked South Carolina, deservedly so. They've been ranked No. 1 all year. They've won 42 straight basketball games. Why wouldn't you pick them?

But at the same time, the people in our locker room believed in us. That's all you need is a belief in one another, a confidence in one another. We just do it for the person to our left and our right.

We might not be -- we're clearly not as tall as them. We're

clearly not as athletic as them. But I think we're a very, very skilled basketball team that loves one another, and that's going to get you really, really far.

Q. How in the world do you get grounded again, get ready to play on Sunday?

McKENNA WARNOCK: I think it's just celebrate it for right now, and then we're going to go back and watch some film. It's just a business mentality at this point, and I think we've done a really good job of doing that in the past. Big Ten Tournament prepares you for this, and I think that's kind of how we look at it.

Q. Caitlin, you've faced just about every kind of defense possible and teams trying to stop you. What was special about this South Carolina defense, and how were you able to get the better of it?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think, like you said, I've seen a lot of really good defenses. The thing was we saw some weaknesses early in the game, and that's what we kept going to. That gives a lot of credit to Coach Bluder because she kept putting us in the same action that was working.

They were guarding Mon pretty high up, and that allowed me to get to the rim. I thought we were dragging their rim protectors away from the rim, where they're used to being. But honestly a lot of screen action. A lot of down screens, a lot of ball screens. That was something we saw in film that we thought could work, and we executed it well.

They still made it tough on me. They were all over my shorts. They created eight turnovers, a few were probably forced by myself. They're really, really tremendous. But at the same time, I find confidence in the fact that I feel like this team has seen just about every defense you can face. I'm never intimidated going into a game. I don't feel like these girls are ever intimidated.

We know we need to be crisp. We need to be clean. I still don't think we shot the ball to the best of our ability. I'm 5-for-17. That's not too hot. I probably could have made a few more. And I thought they did a good job on Gabbie Marshall. I could have gotten her another shot. I thought they were all over her. Yeah, I think it's just the confidence we find in each other.

Q. Caitlin, I know you're a hoops junkie. What did you make of the game plan you guys had? Did you have some input in it as the week went on, how to stop them, and also as it pertained to your offense?

CAITLIN CLARK: Yeah, I didn't have any input.

Sometimes I give input, and they still don't want it. But our coaches, they've been in this game a really long time. I thought they had a tremendous game plan, and obviously they've been working on this scout for quite some time. It's probably very obvious that South Carolina was going to get to this point.

I loved our game plan, pack the paint. At times I wasn't even really two feet out of the paint. We were going to live with them making threes. I thought Johnson came through and made some tough threes in situations where they really needed it, but we never got discouraged or anything like that.

I loved our game plan. We really packed the paint, made them earn it around the rim. Obviously they got some O boards, but at the same time, nobody said we were going to outrebound them. That would have been a lie.

I thought all we did was just come back down every single time and buy into our defense. And Coach Bluder switched it up quite a bit too. I thought that gave them problems. She's always a coach, we're never going to stay in one defense too long. You've got to keep switching it up.

Q. Kate took me to task a little bit ago. I asked what it took and how you survive the waves that come from the first quarter. She said, I thought we thrived actually. Do you guys agree with that, that you set the tone?

McKENNA WARNOCK: Yeah, I think obviously coming out and getting that lead right away was really awesome. I don't think they've been down much this season, and that was a great thing for us. I think we do a great job when we come out starting hot, and we definitely did this game.

I'm just really proud of our ability to kind of withstand all their runs at times and keep and maintain that lead the entire game.

Q. Caitlin, before this game, would you have compared Monika to Draymond Green? Because during the game, I was getting quite a few texts from basketball people who were saying she's the difference maker. Monika, I wondered if you watched some Draymond Green footage to get you in this mood?

CAITLIN CLARK: To be honest, I would never compare Monika to Draymond. The person on our team who I would is Kate Martin. She's the player who does all the dirty work. Sets people up. Sets her teammate up. Is an emotional leader. They might have gotten Kate and

Monika confused. Monika, not so much. We could definitely find different player comps for her.

Mon, she made some tough baskets tonight. She had a finish there at the end of the third quarter that was about as good a finish as I've ever seen by a post player. She had 6'7" guarding her and makes a huge basket that gives us another two points. It comes down to it at the end. We needed that.

Q. Monika, for you, it was a decision to come back, and I'm just wondering if you reflected on that decision tonight. Caitlin, just I'm wondering, it seems you ran into the crowd to go hug someone. Can you talk about that moment and who you hugged and what that was like.

MONIKA CZINANO: I mean, the decision to come back was the easiest decision I've ever had to make quite honestly. I would have been a fool to leave this program and leave this family. I would have done it -- I knew we had something to prove, but I would have done it no matter what. I would have come back with no expectations at all.

We are truly are such a family. You hear it a lot, and it gets kind of old. This is something I'll never forget, being with this group of people and getting to do what we love to do every single day and working through adversity every single day. So no regret on my end.

CAITLIN CLARK: Just my family in the stands, that's who I was hugging. Obviously they've been my biggest supporters all throughout my career. That's one of the reasons I came to Iowa is because they wanted to be at all of my games, travel around and support. My dad comes to a lot of my stuff. Just to share the moment with them, it's pretty special to all of us to have our families here and be on this ride with them, people that have sacrificed a lot for us.

Q. The question is for Caitlin: With the game tonight widely being talked about as maybe one of the most watched women's basketball games in history, how does it feel to be a part of something like that?

CAITLIN CLARK: It's incredible. But I think people tune in because they love watching the Iowa Hawkeyes. I truly believe that. I understand I'm an exciting player and people love to watch my game, but we play the right style of basketball.

We're a skilled team. We shoot the ball well. But I think it's the joy and the love we have for one another. We smile. We support each other. We high five. It's incredible, and it's special.

I think, if you want to really see a team, you look at Coach Bluder and what she's built here at the University of Iowa. They're teams. And that carries you a really long way.

Q. Caitlin, you get the national stage again Sunday when the odds said maybe that might not happen, and you also are chasing the ultimate prize. How do you look at that right now?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think we have to be able to enjoy this for a moment but also reset our minds. We didn't come this far just to play in the National Championship Game. We're here to win it. We're here to hoist the trophy. We're here to cut down another championship net.

We need to take care of our bodies. We need to take care of our minds. But I think we have one of the best coaching staffs that are going to have us really, really prepared for that game. LSU is a very, very talented team. But I think we're going to have a lot of different things that we can throw at them. We're going to change things up. We just have to have the belief that we can win. We don't have to change anything that we've done.

Dial in on player personnel and be who we are and be who we've been all year long.

Q. This is for Monika and/or McKenna: What's it like playing alongside someone like Caitlin who not only puts up 41 points but then is so selfless about it?

MONIKA CZINANO: It's really special. Obviously we get to see all the work she puts in each and every day. So when she wins this awards and is doing all this stuff, it's not surprising to any of us. We see what goes on behind the scenes.

The way she's grown as a teammate and a leader on this team has been really special. She really fits into our family atmosphere. She always has. Coach Bluder recruits people who she knows are going to make a team, like Caitlin said.

It's so fun to play with her honestly. Getting to watch that every single day, getting to be a part of it, you can't make it up. It's one of the coolest things I'll ever do in my life. I love it.

McKENNA WARNOCK: There's honestly no one more deserving than Caitlin honestly. It's been so fun to grow with her these past few years, 92 games or something we've started together. She just elevates everyone around you. Even I find myself just standing in awe watching her every single day.

It's just so fun and so amazing for women's basketball in general and Iowa Hawkeyes.

Q. Caitlin, Magic Johnson has been name checking you on Twitter throughout the tournament, and there were people who going into this game were comparing it to Bird and Magic in '79 because of you and Aliyah. I wonder what those comparisons are like, and do you think about the fact that this could really elevate the game to a completely different level just like their title game in '79 did?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think it's really good for our game. Like Coach Staley said, last year during the Player of the Year discussions, we need to have these discussions. That's what gets people engaged in women's basketball. It shouldn't be one person end all be all. People wanted this matchup for probably for a couple years, and obviously it's the Iowa Hawkeyes versus South Carolina. That's what it was. We won because we were a team.

South Carolina is probably one of the deepest teams in America. So I think it's really, really good for the game. That's what's going to have it going forward. I think, even when we played Louisville, people were talking about matchups, and that's what got people excited. I think the viewership showed that as well.

I wouldn't be surprised when these numbers come out, I think it will probably be the most watched women's basketball game in the tournament of all time. So yeah, I think it's good for the game. It moves it forward and gets people excited about what's on TV.

Q. Caitlin, this game tonight marked the matchup of the last two Players of the Year. Do you feel like you gained new fans in this game tonight? And secondly, how does it feel to take down undefeated South Carolina to get to the National Championship Game?

CAITLIN CLARK: I don't feel like I gained an advantage other than my team winning and advancing to the National Championship. That's awesome.

Aliyah is a tremendous player. They got some tough calls on her tonight. Maybe in a different game they're not fouls. But she was my teammate, and I know how great of a player she is but even a better person. That's why she's going to be the No. 1 draft pick, as she should. It's been fun to watch her success at South Carolina and what she's been able to build there, and I truly mean that.

But yeah, I mean, obviously it feels really good to take down a team that's won 42 straight basketball games.



That's really, really hard to do. Nobody's been able to do that all year. They've been ranked No. 1 in the polls. All we did was believe and go out and achieve it.

Q. Lisa, could you talk about your offensive game plan. As Caitlin said, you obviously spotted some weaknesses as far as pick-and-roll and dragging their big players out away from the basket.

LISA BLUDER: We really mostly ran our offense that we run every single game. But when we saw that we were able to score on some ball screens, we tried to emphasize that a little bit more.

With McKenna being a three-point shooter, we knew that Aliyah would have to come out and guard her out there. McKenna ended up making one of them, but I thought all of her shots were pretty good, and I would let McKenna shoot -- she's a 40 percent three-point shooter over her four-year career. So my money's on her making those.

It was really just a lot of screening action and floor balance. I think we do a really good job of balancing the floor. So really -- somebody really can't help as much on you.

Q. Lisa, when the matchups are this hyped, this anticipated, they don't often live up to it. Caitlin did and then some. Did she even surprise you tonight?

LISA BLUDER: She doesn't really surprise me anymore, but I was worried about her getting tired out there. She had to play a lot of minutes. I think she's the most phenomenal basketball player in America. I just don't think there's anybody like her.

In so many regards, not only scoring, but passing the ball, handling the ball. She had the ball in her hands almost all the time tonight against some pretty good defensive players.

And then it's her mentality. I think that's what's so special. She believes in herself. She believes in her teammates. She's so confident, but she's put the work in to deserve to have that confidence.

She said when we were recruiting her, I want to get to a Final Four, and it takes one person to believe it.

Q. Back in October you said on Locked On Women's Basketball, you wanted to develop Caitlin's game in the paint. How has that happened over the course of the season, and what clicked for her tonight in that regard?

LISA BLUDER: That didn't come out as planned. I really

thought I'd be able to create some more post-up options for her and just try to develop her game that way. It didn't go so well. She didn't like being down there. Maybe she's just more comfortable 30 feet away from the basket.

Sometimes it's not good to try to stick a square peg into a round hole, instead of focusing on something that she wasn't maybe always doing to keep doing what she was doing pretty well.

Q. Do you think there's been a pivotal moment this season that helped you get to this championship game, maybe going back to February 21st against Maryland?

LISA BLUDER: Somebody else asked me about that, and I think that was a huge point for us. We got embarrassed there. We came back and went to work.

I mean, Brenda did a great job of having a defense we hadn't seen. Louisville tried it, and now we're ready for it. So I thank her. If it wasn't for that, we might not have been ready for that down the line.

You always learn more from losses, unfortunately. You really do. Wins feel better, but you learn a lot more from losses, and we learned a lot from that one. We came together even more after that loss, I think.

Q. Kind of a two-part question: South Carolina this year had the tendency to have some lower-scoring quarters, but their defense enabled them to keep close in those quarters. What can you say about your ability to take advantage and get a nine-point lead in the first quarter? And then the second part, they've been able to have quarters where they outscore a team 25-10, 25-12. What were you guys able to do to make sure that didn't happen? You kind of answered every single run they had.

LISA BLUDER: I look at the score sheet. We led for almost 36 minutes of this game. We shot the ball very well to begin the first quarter. Second quarter, we took a little bit of a nose dive but then came back in the third and fourth quarters.

19 of our last 24 quarters, we have shot over 50 percent from the field. I think we're the only team in America right now that shoots over 50 percent. And a lot of that, of course, is Caitlin. Her adjusted field goal percentage tonight is 56 percent.

But Monika Czinano, 75 percent shooting. Kate Martin, Addison O'Grady came in, who hasn't played a lot of minutes for us. We needed her height tonight. She came

in and did a great job for us.

What was the second part?

Q. Never went on a really big run.

LISA BLUDER: That second quarter, we kind of took a little bit of a dive there. I wish Gabbie could have nailed that three going into the half, that would have been great momentum for us. But we still went in with a lead.

We talked about 20 more minutes of basketball to beat South Carolina, and you've got a memory for a lifetime. They did it.

They were feeling really good at halftime, and I thought we came out and shot the ball very well again. Couldn't keep them off the glass. Cardoso's just, she's amazing. She's just so big and keeps the ball high when she O-boards as well. She's just really good.

Q. Lisa, I'm on the fashion beat, I have to know, were you and Jan wearing matching blazers?

LISA BLUDER: We were not. I didn't see her when she left the hotel to come over here to scout. She walked in like ten minutes before the game, and I said oh, no.

Everybody else has fashion people and makeup people. I've got a Revlon flatiron in my hotel room. So that's about as far as I go.

Q. Addison O'Grady approach tonight, just take me through what you were expecting from her. Obviously you know you need to go big, and if you gave her any kind of specific instructions heading in to what turned out to be ten pivotal minutes for her?

LISA BLUDER: She played really well. We needed her height, just like we did against Colorado, same thing. Addy hasn't played as much this year, as maybe we anticipated that she would, but boy, she's put in some valuable minutes in this tournament for us. We kind of told her, bring out your inner volleyball girl right now. She was a good high school volleyball player, and that's what you've got to do out there to try to get those deflections off those rebounds.

Q. I just want to ask you, just you're coaching against Coach Staley, a two-time national champion. What is it like coaching against her, especially game planning against Coach Staley?

LISA BLUDER: It wasn't any different than any other game as far as I really tried not to look down there a whole lot. I

don't try to look at interactions of coaches with officials and that sort of thing.

So to me, it was Iowa versus South Carolina. It was -- you know, she's a great coach obviously. She's got unbelievable talent. She's our Olympic coach. I have so much respect for her and her staff, which includes a former Iowa Hawkeye on her staff in Jolette Law.

And I guess that's what makes this win even more special is because it was against somebody who's had such a storied career.

Q. You've had such a legendary career, over 30 years of coaching. How does this game rank up there with some of the other ones you've experienced?

LISA BLUDER: This has got to be number one, I don't know. I'm hoping for another good one on Sunday. But any time you are beating the No. 1 team in the country who hasn't lost all year long and they're being coached by the Olympic coach, yeah, it's a pretty good day. It's a pretty good day.

Q. So when you were recruiting Caitlin, what did you see in her that you thought was kind of special? Did you ever see games like this happening when she was in high school and you were trying to get her to come to Iowa?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, she had games that were pretty amazing. The three-point line is a lot closer in high school than it is now. But recruiting her, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out she was a pretty good basketball player. You could just watch her walk onto the court almost, and at a young age, know that she is something special.

It wasn't any like found underneath a rock. I mean, this kid, everybody knew about her in the whole country. She represented USA Basketball. So recruiting her was difficult. It took a lot of hard work.

I'll tell you, Jan Jensen, my associate head coach, worked harder than anybody to get her to come to Iowa. So I'm really proud of the relationship that we built with her from a young age. I think she always felt comfortable around us. Really had great conversations on the phone.

She's a relationship kid, and that really meant a lot to her.

Q. Your shot chart tonight was pretty amazing with all the threes, layups, and free throws. How much of that would you say is really driven by the talent you have? Do you think as the program continues forward and



**the talent changes, you'll be able to replicate that?
How much of that is sort of your philosophy is going to
endure going forward?**

LISA BLUDER: It's absolutely our philosophy. We love shooting threes. It's fun. Everybody gets excited about it.

So, yeah, we shoot open threes even in transition. Yeah, otherwise we know the best next shot is right around the rim. So that is definitely philosophy.

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