

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 7, 2024
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
Target Center

Michigan Wolverines Kim Barnes Arico Cameron Williams Laila Phelia

Postgame Press Conference

Michigan - 76, Minnesota - 57

THE MODERATOR: Michigan press conference will start with an opening statement from Coach Barnes Arico. Go ahead.

KIM BARNES ARICO: We knew tonight was going to be a tough game. Minnesota is a great program. I know they have a couple of injuries, but they're still really well coached. They play incredibly hard. They execute their stuff.

Amaya Battle was coming off a tremendous night last night, and she had another great night tonight. So we're just really happy with the way our team came out and established ourselves from the beginning of the game. On the defensive end, I thought we really set the tone and played a great game.

I thought Laila Phelia was awesome, as well as Cameron, who is here with us today too.

Q. You guys had really great ball control today. What helped you limit the turnovers to seven? And what impact did that have?

CAMERON WILLIAMS: I think we always play our best when we move the ball. We try not to have like a one-man game. When we're able to move the ball, get it inside out is when we play our best.

Q. This goes for either one of you. I think you guys both know where you stand: Some people have you on the bubble. Some people have you in. Was there an extra sense of urgency to make sure you got this one tonight?



CAMERON WILLIAMS: Yeah, for sure. Every game matters at this point. This is March. We're playing for everything at this point. Every game, we want to play like it's our last.

Q. Laila, tonight you flirted with your career high of 23. You were able to get downhill a lot into the heart of the defense. What was going well for you tonight?

LAILA PHELIA: I definitely feel like just being aggressive and setting the tone, I feel like that helped me a lot. Just staying aggressive and then also moving the ball. Then on defense, I feel like that plays a big role too, getting stops and being able to go aggressively on offense.

Q. Elissa Brett also had a great game. Six rebounds, three charges, and only that one personal foul at the defensive end. Can you talk about her impact on the defensive end?

LAILA PHELIA: You need a player like her honestly, just how aggressive she is and her toughness, her effort. It's amazing. And being able to play with someone like that helps us a lot.

So she definitely played such a big role in today's win.

CAMERON WILLIAMS: She's a difference maker for sure. I love playing with her. She's always doing the things that you need, the little things that you need to do to succeed, whether that's rebounding, getting charges, getting on the floor. She's doing it all.

Q. It seemed like you guys were really able to get a lot of stops on defense and then quickly push it back in transition on offense. Can you talk about that aspect of the game, how that defense really translated into offense.

CAMERON WILLIAMS: For sure, defense really translates and fuels our offense. Again, we pride ourselves on defense, so when we do get stops, we really try to push the pace and advance the ball, so we can really get that transition offense.



Q. Coach, obviously you guys have Indiana tomorrow. Back when you guys last played them, you know the result, but we're uncertain about Mackenzie's health. How do you go into that game?

KIM BARNES ARICO: The first time we played them, they played exceptionally well. They started the game, might be a record this year, 15 of 15 from the floor. So we know how great of a team they are. We know how talented they are.

Obviously, we don't know about their injury either, so I guess it's a wait and see until tomorrow, until we find out.

We're just trying to be the best Michigan team that we can be, and I think that's really important for us moving forward. I think we totally took steps in the right direction with that tonight and our toughness and the way we battled. Obviously Elissa Brett setting the tone with the rebounding and the defense, but also our ability to take care of the basketball.

We limited our turnovers, and we had 20 assists. So we took positive steps heading into tomorrow's contest against a really great team.

Q. Kind of just go back to Elissa Brett a little bit. We kind of talked throughout the year about how her aggressiveness can lead to fouls, but today you saw the results without getting that foul. I think her foul came in the last two minutes of the game. Can you talk about how she was able to get the charges and rebounds without getting into foul trouble.

KIM BARNES ARICO: Last game she had 11 rebounds. I feel like she's dialed it up. She was injured for us at different times during the course of the year. She was injured the beginning of the year, she missed for a long period of time. She got injured the last time we played Minnesota in the fourth quarter. You guys were there. So she missed for a period of time there.

I feel like she's finally healthy, and she's really playing at another level. I mean, her ability to impact the game never shows up really in a box score. You might look at it and be like, oh, that kid's okay. Then you come to the game, and you're like, holy cow, that kid's a difference maker.

She's a coach's dream. You love a kid that will sacrifice herself for the good of the team. Taking those charges, I'm sure she's going to be all bruised up. Getting those rebounds, mixing it up. Just her toughness is just another level.

Q. I'd be interested in getting your perspective on Battle. You mentioned her earlier. You've seen her now for two seasons. Did you get the sense she maybe kind of went to a different level in this tournament?

KIM BARNES ARICO: I actually spoke to Christy Winters-Scott when I was interviewed after the game, and I'm like holy cow, we have to face that kid for another two years. I don't want to think about that today. I'm going to just celebrate that victory.

She is playing -- I mean, she made some plays today. She kept her dribble. Last night she was phenomenal and finished the night without a turnover. She's just really take the next steps.

I think she had to when Mara went down. She's had to take on a different role, but she's kind of embraced that role and kind of putting the team on her back. She's just doing a heck of a job.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Laila's night offensively, as well as her guarding Battle most of the night on defense.

KIM BARNES ARICO: Sometimes people, that doesn't show up in the box score either, don't realize how much of an effort Laila exerts every night. She's like, all right, Coach, who's the other team's best player? I want that job. I want to own that role. I want to take on that responsibility.

So as much as we need her on the offensive end, she wants to do it on the defensive end as well. She just has an incredible ability to get downhill. She's a three-level scorer. She's a dynamic player. She found a way to get to the free-throw line tonight and just played her butt off.

In my opinion, she's one of the best players in the country, and she was recognized this week as a first-team All Conference player in our league, which is really special. So a great night for her.

Q. Tonight great ball control really helped you guys to like stay in momentum throughout the game. What impact did that have, and is that something you were really focusing on leading up to the tournament?

KIM BARNES ARICO: You've been with us all year, so we always say we're a work in progress. But really our best games this year have been when we've had over 16 assists and we've really taken care of the ball and made good decisions with the ball.

I think it's something that we emphasize every single day in practice. Some days we're not so fortunate, it doesn't show up in the game, but we work on it every day. I thought we just did a tremendous job of making extra passes, of finding our teammates, and of taking care of the ball.

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Minnesota Gophers

Dawn Plitzuweit

Amaya Battle

Mallory Heyer

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Michigan - 76, Minnesota - 57

THE MODERATOR: We'll start the Minnesota press conference with an opening statement from Coach. Go ahead.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: First of all, I thought Michigan played well, and I thought they made life really difficult for us. They were very physical with us, and it was hard to get the ball around the rim as many times as we want, and when we didn't get it there, we didn't score it as efficiently.

But that's credit to them and how they defend. Wish them the best moving on.

I thought our young ladies really kind of showed some toughness tonight. Things didn't go our way in the first quarter for sure, and at that point in time, we really had to find a way to find the energy and the toughness and the resiliency to keep battling. I thought, to our credit, to our young ladies' credit, they did a really good job of that. And throughout the course of the game.

I thought we saw some players step in and give us some good minutes and make some good things happen. Mallory Heyer getting 17 rebounds in a game is a phenomenal display of toughness, and I thought that's something certainly we're excited to continue building upon. Amaya having two games of really trying to make things happen and make us, kind of will us offensively in a lot of ways. Did a great, great job with that.

I'm hopeful that we have a chance to keep playing in postseason. I think these young ladies have earned that. When we look at kind of the body of work for the whole season, I think they've put themselves in a position to



continue playing, and we hope we have a chance to keep doing that.

Q. Amaya, what did these last two games do for your confidence? And what are your plans for this off-season after seeing what you were able to accomplish?

AMAYA BATTLE: I think that we all had a great past two games. I think our team brought a lot of energy, and we just really worked super hard.

I think it gave a lot of us confidence to see what we can do, and we were down two of our players who give us a lot. I think these past two games just instilled a lot of confidence in the whole team.

For the off-season, personally I want to work on getting stronger. I want to work on making better reads and just all the little things about basketball. As a team, we want to continue to be more resilient and get tougher.

Q. I want to kind of follow up on that. Amaya, the last two games have kind of been at a whole different level for you. What, in your opinion, is the key to your taking that step? And for the both of you, what do you think the team learned about itself, having to play without two starters?

AMAYA BATTLE: It just goes back to kind of what I said yesterday. The coaches have invested a lot in me when it comes to telling me what they expect, how I can do it, showing me film, working with me in the gym when we can.

So I think all the things the coaches have put into me, as well as my teammates, they always instill confidence in me. They always tell me what I need to hear, and they always have my back.

Seeing them work as well inspires me. I would say it's a collective effort from my coaches and teammates and obviously my family, who I rely on a lot. What was the second part of your question?

Oh, I think we all learned that we can step up, even despite



the odds, that we all have a lot to bring to the table. We just need to consistently do that no matter if we're down two starters or not.

MALLORY HEYER: Yeah, I agree with that. Like Coach P said about toughness, I think we've all learned toughness goes a long way, and we all need to stick together and play our hearts out.

We just learned how much energy can affect the game and how much it can give us momentum.

Q. Mallory, I know you guys really don't believe in moral victories, but seeing how the bulk of your team is young, underclassmen, what are you guys looking forward to most about this off-season and next season?

MALLORY HEYER: I think just continuing to grow our game, individually and as a team, working on our team chemistry. Just continuing to get faster, continuing to get stronger, and work on our game both ends of the floor.

This league is very veteran, and we're a very young team, and we have a ways to go. But we're willing to put the work in, and we're excited.

Q. This goes for either one of you. Five more wins this year overall, going from 11 to now 16 with, as Coach said, a potential of now playing in postseason. What can you guys just say about the development of everybody, of yourselves from last year to this year?

MALLORY HEYER: I think this year we came in, and we've all -- it's a completely new system, and we're all just trying to learn that. It's a completely new team, new coaching staff, everything like that. The bottom line is we had to learn a lot of new stuff, but I think we showed a lot of progress this year.

We've really been working on the little things on both ends of the floor.

Q. As you said, a lot of players stepped in. Can you talk about Ajok's performance tonight?

AMAYA BATTLE: Ajok came in, and she hit a three, a couple threes. The first shot was a three. She came and got steals. She was being aggressive and she was getting downhill. She had a great performance, not just on offense, but on defense. She's super long, so she was showing her presence. She got a couple steals as well. I think she did a great job.

Q. For either one of you or both of you, Coach talked

about the physical nature in the way Michigan plays defense, actually plays the whole game. Can you just talk about the challenges that Michigan offers as a defensive team? Are they maybe the most physical team you will face in this conference?

AMAYA BATTLE: Yeah, they're super physical on both ends. I think all teams in the conference are super tough and physical in their own way. On offense it felt like any shot you got, it was earned like you had to work for that. Even then it still wasn't super easy.

They were crashing the boards super hard as well on both ends. Even on offense, they're imploring themselves as well. So they're super physical.

Q. Amaya, as you were subbed out near the end of the game, there was a loud cheering for you from Gopher fans, and there was also a sign that said "Battle Zone." I saw a lot of young fans there for you. How does that feel?

AMAYA BATTLE: The "Battle Zone" sign is from my sponsor, so shout out them.

Yeah, it felt great. I'm from here, so I love that I'm able to represent my state every game every day, and just knowing that they have my back and the team's back is just amazing.

Q. My last question for either of you. What did you guys learn most about yourselves and your team this year?

MALLORY HEYER: That's a great question. I just think sticking together. That was the biggest thing. Obviously we went through some injuries this year and some bumps in the road, but just sticking together and bringing energy every single day and continuing to be optimistic and have a positive attitude.

AMAYA BATTLE: I think I learned a lot of resilience and just a greater understanding of what the process looks like when it comes to growth. Dawnie preaches a lot of mental things, and the process you think goes like this, but sometimes you're going to go like this and plateau. You've got to stay resilient through it and keep going. I think I gained an understanding of that, and that can help me going forward.

Q. I know you don't believe in moral victories, but how much confidence does this give you heading into the off-season about why you guys can accomplish next year?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think we went through phases, and I think Amaya talked about it, is that we went through phases where we did things, and we're trying to add to them. You hope that all of a sudden you're really good at that next piece, but maybe you're not quite as good but you're not quite there.

Then all of a sudden, you see this breakout game, and you saw that. I thought both of them had breakout games in this tournament. I thought Amaya had it on offensive end. Actually yesterday and today. But Mallory defensively and rebounding the way that she did. She's always been a good rebounder, but, man, she's continuing to really, really battle.

So what I think we've learned is that we've said this from the beginning. I've said this very openly. We have a group of young ladies who cares a great, great deal. They want to be good. They care. But it doesn't always happen as fast as you want it to happen. There is a growth process with it.

The fact that we're continuing to see growth, even when things are really hard, is something that is, I think, a tribute to who they are and how badly they want to be good.

Q. Coach, with the potential opportunity to have some postseason play, just how much would that mean for this young team, not only for this year, but for next season and future seasons.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: It means a great deal for us, and I believe this group has really earned that opportunity. When you look at the quality -- some of the quality of wins that we've had and you look at where we've positioned ourselves in terms of the NET, I think they've earned that opportunity, and I'm really excited for them.

It's important for them to continue to experience what postseason is like. To win a game now in the tournament, in the Big Ten tournament, but then also to have an opportunity this week in between. The Big Ten Conference is one of the conferences obviously that plays the tournament early, and then you have that week before Selection Sunday, and what does that look like? That's completely different.

But now we have a chance to get used to that and to do that. That's going to be a part of our growth moving forward.

So I'm really excited for us, and then you have a chance to see a different style of play. So that's fun too.

Q. Michigan came into this game tied for the best

scoring defense in the conference. Can you talk a little bit about what your game plan was defensively and if there were any specific players that you were kind of looking out for on the defensive end.

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: Well, Laila is someone I've known pretty well -- as a matter of fact, Laila and our daughter played AAU together when I was coaching at Northern Kentucky. So I've watched Laila play for a lot of years. It's really a lot more fun when she was playing on the team with our daughter than when you have to coach against her.

The goal is to go in and limit her good opportunities, but that's easier said than done. She's really a force to be reckoned with on all levels and on both ends of the court.

Then I think just overall the way that Michigan can shoot the basketball from the perimeter. You're trying to limit good opportunities. So we were trying to in the first, kind of the first half, take them out of some ball screen opportunities that way, but then you've got to really scramble and you've got to get the shooters on the perimeter because you're kind of stretched at that point in time.

We didn't do as good a job with that, and then tried to change rhythm with switching some ball screens and tried to change rhythm with going into a zone, and then came back into a man and tried a couple different things.

I think that's all a part of our growth, too, for our team. That was good to see us be able to make some of those adjustments. I know it didn't really answer your question about Michigan, sorry. But talk about our group.

Q. If you could just talk about just the challenge that you guys faced to find points both with Mara and then Sophie out of the lineup. The effort was usually there. The want to, right? But just the challenge of finding points without those players. I guess is there a chance that one or two of them could be back, if you do continue on this year?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: I think certainly to identify we do have challenges to score without those two on the court, but again, I think what's the positive part of it is that we've seen different players step up in different opportunities and learn that they can maybe do a little bit more than they were before. So that's the positive part of it.

The opportunity to maybe have one or both of them back, well, we're hopeful, but we don't know that that's going to happen. That would be a nice gift if that were the case and kind of go from there.

I know that those two young ladies are working their tails off and doing everything they can from a recovery standpoint. That includes having that bone stimulator on for endless hours a day to find a way. From what they're eating and how they're working out and training and being smart, they're doing everything they can.

I think in the meantime trying to be great teammates and encouraging and leading in a different capacity.

Q. Amaya talked about how much this staff has invested in her, but can you speak to the growth that you've seen from her throughout this entire season and since you first got here in June in those first practices?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: If you remember back to Amaya in March of 2023, that's when we first had a chance to work with her and do some team things or some individual workouts. Amaya was a player that we said over and over and over again, you have to penetrate to score. You have to catch to shoot. You have to be a threat, because right now teams can play off of you because you're not a threat. When you penetrate, you're penetrating to pass, so teams can take that away, and they're daring you to almost score. When you penetrate to score, you're going to create opportunities for everyone else.

From that time to where she's played in the last two games, it's been really, really fun to watch her play and to see her confidence grow and to hear her voice continue to grow, and to see her defensively continue to make strides and make plays.

So I think it's just been really fun. I think her best days are still far into her future. She's invested in wanting to continue to get better.

Q. You talked about growth and experiencing new things. How does like wondering what is this next week going to be like for you and your team. You're uncertain about what's next. Could be the off-season. Could be to continue playing. How do you tell your young team like how to prepare?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: The first thing we'll do is take a couple days off, rest, and then come back. When we come back, we'll go back to basic, simple, fundamental basketball and work on scoring at the rim a little bit more efficiently, hitting open shots, swinging the basketball. We'll look at a couple things defensively that can continue to help us.

We'll just really work on the basics of how we have to

continue getting better. That's really fun to get -- it's great during the season because you're game prepping all the time, but it's really fun when you have days where you can focus on who you are and how you want to continue to improve. So that's what we can continue to do during that week before we know.

Q. Just how huge can it be for this program to have so many returning players next season, knowing that it's a completely new system from last year, knowing how you implement video? Just how big can that be for their growth?

DAWN PLITZUWEIT: It's so important. Being able to make plays when you're kind of thrown into this environment, it's kind of a challenge when you haven't seen it for a while and understand what it looked like. That's a challenge.

I looked out at one point in time, and I think I had to smirk a little bit, there's three freshmen and two sophomores out there right now. They were playing their guts out. They were doing good things. But the ability to do it consistently is not something that -- you're not supposed to be able to do that yet. You haven't done it enough times.

So we make a change, a switch in how we're guarding in action, or how we're guarding maybe in the post, but then we move to something else. To be able to kind of counter that is something that it's easier to do the more times you're in it and you understand and you can make that adjustment.

I thought, again, our young ladies did a really good job of that. Then it would be one possession where we just didn't do that to the ability. We forgot that Laila likes to step through. We forgot that we have to help on that baseline scenario. We forgot how physical that really is in going to finish that play, whatever it is.

Then I thought there was a possession where Ayianna Johnson did a great job. She played behind and understood, I'm not going to let her get by me and walled up and made it a really tough possession. Again, those are all just kind of growth things in so many different ways, but you're not supposed to be able to do that when it's your first season of college basketball or even your second season sometimes. That's why you have veteran kids. So we'll have veteran kids, and that's a lot more fun.

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