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An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Notre Dame are student-athletes Brittany Mallory and Becca Bruszewski and Coach Muffet McGraw. We'll open with a statement from Coach McGraw then we'll take questions from the student-athletes.

COACH MCGRAW: I'm really proud of my team and how well they've played in the NCAA Tournament. We've come a long way since November. We've really improved every game.

And I think I look at our leaders here, our captains, who have controlled the team attitude and the intensity that they bring to practice every day, and I think that's why we're here.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. I have a question about the perceived home field advantage you have here, just do you think it actually exists? And then also like talk about the conveniences of having it kind of in your own backyard, like you can take a bus versus a plane, any level of comfort that you have, that kind of thing.

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: I think we would hope it would be a home court advantage just in the essence of the fact we could have a lot of fans here. It's not a far trip. We would want as much support as possible. And when you have a lot of people out there rooting for you, it helps when another team goes on a run or you're on a run yourself.

Q. Becca and Brittany, those of us who cover the Big East have watched Coach McGraw bring really good teams across the country every year to play in the Big East tournament in Connecticut's backyard. Is there even a small level of satisfaction that they have to come to Indiana for once to win a game?

BRITTANY MALLORY: A little bit. It's a neutral site. It's going to be a tough game like they've been all year, so we're ready for the challenge and hopefully a lot of our fans come out.

Q. Becca, Coach McGraw said earlier in the week someone asked if this team had her personality, and she said no, it had yours. How would you describe that? How would you characterize your effect on the team, do you think?

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: I would just say probably business on the court and the complete opposite off the court. That sums it up, basically.

Q. Becca and Brittany, you've played Connecticut tough over the years, but it's been tough for you to win those games. Why do you think it is? What's been the difference even in the tight games that they've been able to win?

BRITTANY MALLORY: We've been talking about this the last couple of weeks, and we need to play a full 40 minutes. If you look back at those three games and even in the past we haven't really completed a game where we've played the best and like hard the whole time.

So we're ready to play the full 40 minutes, and that's how we've been playing the last couple of games. So we're ready to go.

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: Again, I would just say the full 40 minutes and just a full 40 minutes of focus.

A lot of times they go on runs and we get maybe a little antsy, excited, but just staying focused for the full 40 minutes.

Q. Becca, you guys are one of the top shooting teams in the country, but in the three games against Connecticut you've been around 33 percent. What's the challenge of their defense and how do you deal with that?

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: They're really good at getting in the passing lanes and trying to pressure you in the shots.

So, again, it's just us really relying on screens, really running, focusing on our offense and trying to get the shots off.

Q. Becca, did your team need the example set by Texas A&M against Baylor this week to reinforce the concept that you could beat Connecticut after losing to them three times?

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: I don't think we needed it. But, I mean, we all kind of know what we have to do and we always have the mindset we're going to go into a game and win it.

But seeing that just -- it proves a lot. And it proves the team can push through perseverance, especially being 0-3 and coming up and win in a big-time game when you need to.

Q. Becca, talk a little bit about the knee injury you suffered, kind of working through that, and just how much goes into getting prepared for UConn one more time and hopefully avoiding the last game, getting another game in?

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: The knee injury was just a little tweak. Definitely got a brace. Working well. So far felt fine practice-wise, playing-wise, so I'm going to play regardless. And now that I have a brace it helps a lot. So it's really good.

Q. For either of you, Skylar Diggins hometown girl from up around the school area, and what's it mean having her as a teammate and bringing her back to her home state to play?

BRITTANY MALLORY: It's great. She's been a great leader for us this year. She's really matured from her first year to her sophomore year.

So being able to play in the Final Four in Indianapolis, which is pretty close to South Bend, is great for all of us, and especially for her. Because she's from there, she can have a lot of friends and family come.

Q. Becca, obviously a home state girl yourself. Talk about the experience of coming down here to Indianapolis to play for hopefully a national championship.

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: It's great. I ended my high school career playing Indiana All-Stars here. So it's great that I get to come back for my college career.

Q. Becca or Brittany, what's a healthy Devereaux Peters mean for your team?

BRITTANY MALLORY: I can't even think of a word to describe her. You know, when she's healthy and when she's focused and playing smart, she's a really hard person to guard and she's one of the players that we're glad she's on our team and not on the other team. And she brings a lot to the table for us. And she's been playing great.

Q. Becca, can you talk about Stefanie Dolson and the challenge she presents and how much you have improved with the post defense over the course of the season?

BECCA BRUSZEWSKI: She's a great player. She likes to get people real down deep in the paint.

So, again, I think it's just trying to match her intensity and physicality and trying to body her up.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions for Coach.

Q. Muffet, how do you -- Gary Blair said earlier today that last thing he told the team before they got off the bus in Dallas was don't get off the bus if you don't think you can beat Baylor. What kind of inspirational comments did you have for your bus ride? And, secondly, are we making this up about you having to come to Hartford every year and having to deal with that crowd and that team on their home floor? Do you have any sense of, I don't know, retribution or "it's about time" view about this?

COACH MCGRAW: I enjoy coming to Hartford because the crowds we get are the best in college basketball for postseason tournament. And we have the best attendance. We have great fans from all the schools.

And it's fun to be there and to have good crowds for the other games that UConn's not playing in. It's great for us to be in Indiana. I don't perceive it as a home court advantage exactly. But

it definitely is easier for our fans to get here.

And just playing in the state of Indiana, I think, it was kind of a motivating factor for some of the girls throughout the season. So we're really happy to be playing close to home.

Q. Muffet, usually when we get to this point, the Final Four, the coaches are all pretty accomplished, and I think the four of you are some of the most accomplished in the history of the game. Can you just talk about some of the contrasts [Connecticut Head Coach] Geno [Auriemma] and [Stanford Head Coach] Tara [VanDerveer] and then you and [Texas A&M Head Coach] Gary [Blair]?

COACH MCGRAW: Well, I'd say Geno and Tara, probably night and day. I don't think there are a lot of similarities except for their obvious success and their wins.

They both have racked up quite a few wins. I think Tara is a little more reserved and probably a little bit more politically correct than Geno is. Geno is going to tell it like it is. He's a Philly guy. We appreciate that in Philly.

Gary Blair I'd say is the loquacious one of the group. He probably had you in here a lot longer than his allotted time this afternoon. But he's definitely someone that's got the respect of his peers, as well as the other two do.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the matchup against Connecticut's defense and also how do you keep your players from dealing with the pressure of we have to score because they're scoring, we don't want to -- to make a 12-foot shot even tougher than it has to be?

COACH MCGRAW: They don't get enough credit for their defense. They play really good defense. I think we've had a couple of questions about our offense struggling against them, and probably every team has, because they do. They play such good defense.

I think then you're open and you probably rush your shot a little bit more. I felt we got the same shots that we get for the most part. But we didn't make nearly as many, because I think we were just a little bit rushing a little bit. Somebody's coming over, you're wondering where Moore is, is she going to block it.

So I think for us we have to stay loose. That's one thing this team does really well. They're a very loose bunch.

And the pressure's squarely on Connecticut. So I think that the Big East title is not what we're playing for right now.

I think there was always pressure, and we want to win the league. We want to win the tournament. And I think we got this far by being loose and just playing our game.

And I think that maybe that happened after the Big East tournament. And now we can relax and play our game and hopefully those shots are going to drop for us. But they are a great defensive team.

Q. You walked into my path about Philly. Do you recall when you were coaching Archbishop Carroll meeting Geno for the first time? And what your impressions were?

COACH MCGRAW: I met him through Jim Foster. He was the assistant at Saint Joe's and I followed him in that same position. So we were both good friends with Jim Foster.

And I thought he was a funny guy. I liked him. We go back a long way and share a lot of memories with the same people.

So I have great respect for him, but he's definitely somebody that he's fun to be around because he's -- he can tell a good story. And he's also grown into just a great coach.

I think when you saw him back then he was in the early stages but you knew he had the confidence to become a great coach.

Q. Muffet, he asked about this is your time, the vibe, or what you might say. Just kind of curious, because it would be human nature to have doubt, for three times mixing with them. But if you win this one, this one obviously means more than the other three?

COACH MCGRAW: I think with this team, I think they draw confidence from each other, and I think I draw confidence from them, when I look at how confident they are going into the Oklahoma game going into the Tennessee game, you know we didn't talk at all about what we had to do, what was important beating Tennessee. We just talked about what we normally do for the game plan.

And I think with this, it's going to be the same. We looked at the three games. We took the good things out of it, said here's what we've got to do well, here's what we need to work on.

And I think jokingly the fourth time is a charm because Texas A&M did it. I don't think

that's really going to come into play for us in the pregame talk in the locker room. I think we're just going to talk about the task at hand and really focus on that.

And I know we're ready. We have nothing to lose. And I think that's kind of where we're coming from.

Q. Just as a follow to what you were saying about playing against UConn. You said your team needs to play loose, but do you have to slow -- does it have to slow down a little bit so you won't be rushing shots? And if so, what can you do to get your players to do that?

COACH MCGRAW: You know, I don't think we want to slow down. It's not our game. I think we need to keep attacking and in transition and playing the game we like to play and try to score a lot of points. I think that's where we're most comfortable.

I thought in the Big East at times we played too fast, as you mentioned. And we shot too quickly, and I think in that regard, I think we do need to be a little more selective of our shots. But overall I don't think we want to slow the pace of the game down.

Q. My colleagues and friends here want to know, wanted me to ask you where "Muffet" came from. When you got that name?

COACH MCGRAW: I got that name when I was probably four years old. My uncle gave it to me and it just kind of stuck. Fascinating story.

Q. Are you used to having a team that loose, and how have you had to adjust to them a little bit because of their personality?

COACH MCGRAW: I really have adjusted well to them. I just try to stay out of their way. I really try to stay away from them as much as possible game day, pregame. They're loose, they're singing, they're dancing, and I want them to have their own personality.

I don't want to try to impose my will on them. So I've really let them pretty much dictate how things are going to be. And if it gets loud, that's great, because that's when they're most comfortable. So it's been a real change for me, from the teams in the past that we've had that have come this far.

They were all so business-like. It was a lot different. But these guys, they enjoy every moment, and I really -- I admire them for that.

Q. Could you talk about your staff? Jonathan Tsipis, your associate head coach, Carol Owens, who gave one up for the team, took one for the team, and then you've got Niele Ivey in the bunch, part of the '97 Final Four team, the 2001 champions, and again this year.

COACH MCGRAW: It's so great to have people on the bench that have been here before. Carol Owens comes in in her first year and helps take us back where we were in 1997. 2001 she was on both of those staffs. And Niele Ivey of course as a player on those two teams, to come back as a coach has been rewarding. She's worked so hard to help us get us here. And Jonathan Tsipis, he's an incredibly talented coach, does a great job with the scouting reports.

It's great to have everybody associated with the program to have a chance to be in the Final Four because so many coaches have never had that opportunity.

Q. Realistically, the Indiana ties, playing in Indianapolis, having Skylar and Becca, of course, is it a factor, or is it just something for us to write about conveniently, hey, we've got some Indiana ties in the Final Four?

COACH MCGRAW: I've definitely had a lot of questions about that, and the media does seem to be incredibly focused on that fact that we're playing in Indiana.

And it's a great thing for us, no question about it. We're comfortable. We're comfortable here. Skylar's played here in the all stars. Becca's played here in the All-Stars. It's someplace we know.

They've probably been to games here. So I think definitely it's better than being somewhere outside the state that we've never been before.

Q. You elegantly described the other three coaches when I asked that question. I was including you. So if you wouldn't mind, describe yourself as a coach.

COACH MCGRAW: I think I'm intense. I think I'm competitive. I can be almost as sarcastic as Geno at times, but I've been working on it to try to not be as sarcastic.

But I think still growing as a coach. I think you learn more and more every year, and I think this year has been fun for me because I've enjoyed

the journey a lot more because I've been able to not try to be so in control. Trying to lose a little bit of the control and give it to the team. And it's worked out pretty well for us.

So I think I'm still a work in progress.

Q. Talk a little bit about Becca and what her style of play and just her personality does for the team.

COACH MCGRAW: She really -- she gets us going in the locker room. She's always there. She has the right thing to say at halftime or after the game. She's tough, mentally tough.

I mean, she takes a beating every day at practice, and she never sits out. She doesn't miss a minute. In the Big East final, she hurt her ribs, she couldn't breathe and she passed word down the bench I'll go back in if you need me.

The next day she came out and almost on the first play of the game took a charge. She's so incredibly tough, I think the team draws a lot of strength from her. She sets the tone, absolutely sets the tone for our team.

Her physical presence, she's not going to back down from anyone. And she's incredibly competitive. So she really is -- she's done a great job as our leader this year.

Q. With the men's tournament going on and the women's going on, of course you guys are from Indiana, Butler playing out in Houston, they're from Indianapolis, and you're from northern Indiana, just comment on the two schools representing the men's and the women's.

COACH MCGRAW: It's so great to have Butler back in the Final Four for the second time. Gosh, [Butler Head Coach] Brad [Stevens] has done such a great job with that team to be in two Final Fours, and this year not as expected, certainly, as probably last year was. We're all cheering for Butler, everybody in the state of Indiana that I know is cheering for Butler tonight.

We're really proud of what they've accomplished. I think we do look at them as a little bit of a Cinderella story and here we are in the Final Four at the same time.

So we're hoping they're cheering for us, too.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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Notre Dame Locker Room Quotes

Freshman Natalie Achonwa

On what to expect tomorrow:

"I'm looking forward to playing Connecticut one more time. They're really known and they're a big brand name in college basketball. I'm looking forward to having that fourth chance at them. I think we've worked really hard this whole season to get where we are and I feel like we're not satisfied with this success. I mean it's successful in the program history, but for us as individuals and as a team, I think we feel like we can do so much more, we've worked for so much more, and we're just ready to get out there and play."

On her feelings so far as a freshman, and what her expectations have been:

"You can never expect any of this to happen in your freshman year and I'm just really grateful to have come into such a great team and great coaching staff and being able to utilize the tools that we have to get where we are. But it's never really overwhelming. I think there's a lot, with the media and the schooling and the basketball, but if I wasn't doing it, what would I be doing? So, I love the combustion that we go through."

Sophomore Skylar Diggins

On if this is similar to a home game with the game being played in Indiana:

"I've played here a couple times in a couple state tournaments for Indiana, so it looks a little familiar. I'm a huge Indiana Fever fan, so I had to come to some Fever home games in the summer. I've been around here a lot. I have a lot of family here in Indianapolis. I know my team is excited to be here, a lot of us are from the Midwest, from the Chicago area or Indiana so we know we're going to have a lot of family here. Anytime I come to Indianapolis with this team, I know I'm going to have the opportunity to do great things. Hopefully a lot of people come out and support us, and a lot of Notre Dame Alums from Indiana will come out to watch the game."

On what a win in the home state would mean to Notre Dame fans:

"It would mean a lot. Notre Dame fans are a part of Hoosier basketball and we're all basketball junkies here in Indiana. So I know they're all excited about the games this weekend. I know Notre Dame fans are the most dedicated in the country, and I know they'll be here to support us."

On what the key is to a win against Connecticut:

"UConn is a tough matchup. You have to make sure that you're very focused on the defensive end in transitions. You have to make sure you get back.

They have great guards, they're really fast and they like to push the tempo. They do a great job of offensive rebounding so we've got to make sure we get a body on them. We have to make sure we all play team defense, know where the rotation is and the opportunities when you're not on the ball, and help your teammates."

Junior Natalie Novose!

On Notre Dame's run to the Final Four:

"We lost a lot of experience last year and there were a lot of doubters. This year, we had a lot of confidence in ourselves because we knew what we could do and what we were capable of. Coach told us at the beginning of the year that the sky is the limit for our potential. I think that is a lot of what motivated us this year. We expected to be at the Final Four, that motivated us as well and we worked hard every day to be here."

On their previous matchups with Connecticut this season:

"There have been pretty good matchups and we've played them pretty hard. We were never able to close out the games and play for a full 40 minutes and that's what we've been able to do for these last two games especially and throughout the tournament run. We have to play a 40-minute game with them and if we can pull 40 minutes together, who knows what the outcome could be."

On the keys to victory against Connecticut:

"We need to be able to stop them in transition, that's the biggest thing. They are a great transition team and we need to be able withstand their runs by executing our offense. Also in terms of our rebounding, we have to get them on the boards and we need to try to out-muscle them."

Senior Devereaux Peters

On playing loose during the tournament:

"I think we are not stressing about it. There has been a lot of talk about everyone else and we are just focusing on us and what we can do. We are a very good team and I think when we focus on ourselves and execute everything that the coaches talk about with us in practice and really focus in on what we need to do, we can accomplish a lot of things."

On facing Connecticut for the fourth time:

"I really feel like everyone thinks we are going to lose because it's UConn. We've lost to them three times this year. But, we've already proven we can play with them, we've already proven it's going to be a good game, and it's not going to be easy for them. I think everybody is focusing on the fact that we've lost three times. There's really no pressure on us, I think it's on them to win the fourth time. We are here for the first time we are going to have fun, enjoy it and play a team we are used to playing."

On the team's mentality heading into the national semifinals:

"I think everyone on the team believes we can win. We always have and that's why I think we've played them so well. It's a matter of during the game them slipping or having a few lapses, mental or defensive. I think if we play like we've been playing throughout the tournament. I think we will be fine."