

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

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Coach Lisa Bluder

Women's Basketball Press Conference



LISA BLUDER: After being voted first in the preseason polls for the Big Ten and fourth overall in the country, we're not going to sneak up on anybody this year. We shouldn't be after coming off of a historic year last year, winning both the conference tournament and the regular season title.

But we have every reason to have high expectations for this season. We start the best point guard in the nation in Caitlin Clark. Just last year she was voted the Dawn Staley Guard of the Year and the Nancy Lieberman Guard of the Year.

You've seen the nation's respect. This past week she was named preseason Player of the Year for the Big Ten, AP All-American unanimous, and to get anybody to agree unanimously on anything these days is almost impossible.

Everybody knows she led the country in points last year at 27 points a game, but sometimes people forget she also led the country in assists at eight per game.

We return Monika Czinano, preseason All-Big Ten for the second straight year, and should be after leading the country at 68 percent field goal shooting. Today she was named to the Lisa Leslie watch list, and I really believe that Caitlin and Monika are one of the most dynamic duos in the country.

All of our starters return from last year. McKenna Warnock, the third leading scorer on our team, the second most effective three-point shooter, the second best rebounder on our team.

Gabbie Marshall, another three-point weapon, led our team in steals last year, as well.

Then Kate Martin, like I've said before, is the glue of our team. She's a strong leader. She's a culture builder. She's somebody you want in the locker room. Kate will fill any role that we ask her.

We also return a lot of sophomores, Addie O'Grady, Sydney Affolter, A.J. Ediger, all returning for their

sophomore years. Then we also bring in the addition of -- or get back the services of Sharon Goodman and Shateah Wetering, who both suffered ACL injuries last year.

Unfortunately we did lose Kylie Feuerbach during the summer to that same injury, so she will not be suiting up for the Hawks this year.

We have additions to our team, also, with Central Michigan transfer Molly Davis. Led her team in scoring last year, and she ranks first in Central Michigan history with a 17.7-point-per-game average. Molly is going to give us a lot of depth at the point guard and off-guard positions and will see significant playing time.

We also have freshman Hannah Stuelke coming in from Cedar Rapids, Washington. Hannah was the Gatorade Player of the Year for the state and is doing a really, really good job for us on the floor.

Taylor McCabe also joins us, Nebraska's Gatorade Player of the Year, leads the Nebraska high school program as the best three-point shooter ever in that state.

Then we also bring in Jada Gyamfi from state champion Johnston, Iowa, she was named all-tournament and all-state last year, as well.

Offensively, I always like talking about offense. Last year we ranked No. 1 in the country in field goal percentage, No. 1 in the country in free-throw percentage, second in scoring, third in assists, and our defense made a big jump.

So yeah, I'll talk about that a little bit, too. We needed to make a big jump last year, and we did, and it's still a point of emphasis right now.

But we have a tremendous schedule this year. Six teams in the Big Ten are ranked in the top 25 poll. That's the most ever, and it's the most of any conference in the country. So it's significant -- it's easy to say that we are playing in the most difficult women's basketball conference in America.

We also have a non-conference schedule that is pretty amazing. We are hosting Iowa State ranked eighth in the polls; North Carolina State, who's ranked 10th in the polls; Belmont, who's receiving votes in the national polls. We

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travel to Kansas State, who's also receiving votes in the polls, and we've been invited to the prestigious Phil Knight tournament in Portland for Thanksgiving, where we'll play Oregon State in the first round and then either Duke or No. 6 UConn in the second round.

Again, this is an amazing schedule. 10 teams on our schedule right now rank in the top 25 in the country.

The nation is paying attention. 18 of our 29 games this year are going to be on national television. We've doubled our season ticket sales from last year, and after three straight Carver-Hawkeye Arena sellouts, our team is ready to play and get back into Carver.

I'm sure you have some questions.

Q. Have you ever had all five starters back three years in a row?

LISA BLUDER: I doubt it. I don't know for sure, but I doubt that's happened.

Q. Is that easier when you add some stuff that they already know the basics, if you want to flex your defense or do another offense and such?

LISA BLUDER: You know, it does make it easier because they can help kind of coach the younger class, so I think it's always important we have veterans that they continue to foster the culture of your program, and that's what these guys are doing.

But certainly I don't have to have as many repetitions with them. I can save their legs a little bit, especially somebody like Monika who runs up and down -- the whole length of the floor, not just three-point line to three-point line, so it's nice to be able to give those guys a little bit more of a rest.

Q. When you have an elite player, you see elite players on teams sometimes and they're all about the player; they're not about the team. But you have a team that is a team. Why does that happen?

LISA BLUDER: I think it's recruiting the right type of people. I agree with you; I think we have some superstars on this team, and Caitlin I don't think is the only one. But certainly Caitlin is a superstar. Monika is in her own right.

We have really good players surrounding them that -- I think Caitlin, the way she handles herself allows that. Everybody sees that she's the hardest worker. Everybody sees all the extra time that she puts in. She's a great teammate as far as crediting her teammates with success and building them up all the time.

I think part of that is due to Caitlin, and I think part of it is the culture of our program and that we really stress that everyone is important on our team. Everyone matters.

It is one of our values, and when you walk into our locker room, you see it on the wall. They see it every single day when they walk in, and we talk about it almost every day, that everyone in our circle is just as important as the next person.

Q. Did you worry when she came in, is this going to work? Is it going to happen? Was there ever concern that the pieces were all going to go together?

LISA BLUDER: You know, I think you never know for sure how a freshman is going to blend in with a team, so you're never completely sure.

But we knew how competitive that Caitlin was in high school, and sometimes that's all a person sees. You don't get to know a person as well as we do like talking to them on the phone and having visits with them and really having some deep conversations.

I don't know that everybody gets to see that part of Caitlin that we do and understand -- she understands that she needs everybody else to get to where she wants to, and that helps a lot.

Q. For all the positivity around the program right now, I'd say everybody can agree that last year didn't end the way you guys wanted it to, but how do you feel that little bit of disappointment kind of permeated the off-season and blended with all the positive talk and kind of served as that motivation amid everything else that's come?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think that last year -- yeah, it was really crushing at the end, and it just is a great reminder to everybody that every possession counts. One basket counts. One rebound counts. One turnover counts. That's all it really came down to.

We lost to a really good team that advanced to the Elite 8.

But it has definitely been a very good driving motivator for our team. We talk about it a lot. We talk about it almost daily. We're bringing up examples from that game or that we fell short, because I think if you don't do that, you're not using an opportunity to really motivate your athletes and kind of fuel the fire a little bit for them.

Now, we don't want to focus on it so much that it's all that they see. We certainly want to celebrate the Big Ten

championship and the Big Ten Tournament and those type of things, as well, because if you focus just on a loss, that's a little depressing, right, and who wants to come to practice then.

We really try to use it more as a fuel for fire than anything else.

Q. How far back has Sharon come, and who is probably the most likely backup to Monika in the post?

LISA BLUDER: That's a good question. I feel like right now it's a big question mark, to be quite honest. We're not there yet. We're not there to say that this person is a backup to Monika.

It's still a tight race, and right now Sharon is competing for that time, but also A.J. Ediger, also Addison O'Grady, and we've been messing around with Hannah Stuelke at that position a little bit, as well.

We have a lot of options, and nobody has risen to the top as the clear-cut second in our depth chart at the center position.

Sharon is coming along. I think we're going to see a lot more progress out of her in the next month, and I'm really looking forward to it. We really held her out of most of the summer activities, but I don't know that that did her any favors right now. I think she still has a little ways to go where she feels confident on the floor.

Q. Have you guys played around with the idea of having Monika and Addison on the floor at the same time or Monika and Hannah so that way you still have the scoring threat in Monika but maybe a boost in rebounding?

LISA BLUDER: Yes, absolutely, we've worked on both of those options with Addie at the 4 or the 5 and Hannah at the 4 or 5 along with Monika. So yeah, we've worked on both of those options.

Q. Where does Hannah fit? In high school she did everything, even brought the ball up the court.

LISA BLUDER: We won't have her do that.

Q. You don't need that.

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, we don't need that. Hannah does a lot of things really well. But no, I'm not going to have her at point guard or ball handling guard.

But I'm telling you, she has been really impressive in

practice. You just never know how quickly a freshman is going to adapt to the college game and get that confidence to play at this level, and she's getting there, and it's really fun to watch. It's fun to watch her development and her confidence grow.

She will definitely add to our rebounding, which we needed, and her ability to attack off the dribble is really good. Her ability to post-up is good, and her three-point shot is looking a lot better, as well.

I'm extremely excited about Hannah.

Q. Does she have a natural position, or is she one of those positionless players that you love to have?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, and that's what we kind of look for when we're recruiting is those players that can play a multitude of positions. Hannah can certainly do that. She could play really for us the 3, 4 or 5. We're going to kind of keep her at the 4 and 5 this year as a freshman because our transition offense is quite different between our 1, 2, 3s and our 4/5s.

Q. Given all the excitement and anticipation coming into the season based off the success that you all had last season, obviously the players, the core group that is returning understands what it means to live with that kind of pressure. What has been your message to some of the newcomers about playing under pressure?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, they don't have any idea yet. You're coming from high school to college, and everything is different. The court is longer, it's more physical. It's such a rude awakening for freshmen that first game.

I'll be glad when -- we have an exhibition game that's open to the public so they'll get an opportunity to see what it's like with a buzz in a Carver-Hawkeye Arena, not just a quiet Carver-Hawkeye Arena during practice.

I would hope that our freshmen don't feel as much pressure as our upperclassmen because they are freshmen. They shouldn't. They should be coming in here to learn, to grow, and they shouldn't have that much pressure.

Now, my upperclassmen, they are the ones that should have pressure on them, and like I said at Big Ten media day, Billie Jean King told me that one time: Pressure is a privilege. That's what we are trying to use. She actually wrote that on a piece of paper and signed it for me, and we have it framed in our locker room. It's something I want my players to see.

This is what you work for is to be ranked high in the country. Does it bring pressure? Yes. But man, you worked hard for it, so you'd better enjoy it, too.

Q. Along those same lines, the nucleus of this team has been through a lot the last two seasons with high expectations and a lot of spotlight on them, but this year kind of even more so. How equipped do you feel like the leaders of this team are to handle being one of college basketball's top most-talked-about teams for what you guys hope is the whole season?

LISA BLUDER: I mean, I think we have tremendous leadership, and our captains this year are the same as they were last year, which is Monika, Kate and McKenna. Caitlin is a leader in her own right just because she's got the ball in her hands all the time and she's really kind of the face of our program. She's a leader in her own right there, and the way she works, people want to emulate that.

I think we have tremendous leadership on our team, and I think that experience will help them get through a lot of those pressure type of situations.

Q. When you brought Monika in here, she was obviously coming in a position that you had the National Player of the Year. Did you see what she's produced, or did you hope she could do that, or were you quite confident she could do what she's done?

LISA BLUDER: Oh, no. Monika's freshman year was -- wow. I mean, I can't believe how far she has come from her freshman year to her sophomore, junior, senior year and now her fifth year. When Monika came in here as a freshman, she had no idea how good she could be, and she's looking at Megan, who's all-everything, and all she did that year is she learned. She learned how to work. She learned how to be positive like Megan. She learned Coach Jensen and how she wants to demand things in practice. She was a sponge that first year, and she had a messed-up shot, to be quite honest, her freshman year.

Between her freshman and sophomore years, we got in the gym and we went back to soft-touch shooting and we completely changed her style of shooting. She did the hard work then. We gave her the opportunity. We gave her the education. It was up to her to make it work, and she did. She was in the gym all the time doing one-handed shooting, two-hand soft-touch shooting, doing the things that were required for her to straighten out her shot, and boy, did she ever straighten it out. Shooting 68 percent from the field is amazing.

Q. What kind of production do you need from

McKenna and Gabbie?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think that's a key for us, right? Everybody knows about the two. So what are we going to get out of the other three and what are we going to get off the bench? That's what's going to take us farther.

You look at where you can get more production than you did last year. Can we get more from Monika? I don't know. Can we get more from Caitlin? I don't know. That's pretty hard. But I think we can get more from the others.

When you have people that are lethal from 3-point range like McKenna is and like Gabbie is, it makes the other two, Monika and Caitlin's job, so much easier because they cannot just focus on those two. The minute you focus on those two, we've got somebody else that's going to knock it down.

I definitely think McKenna can also help us in rebounding. I think that's an area that she can get better at this year.

Q. The initial thought when you brought in Molly Davis was that she was going to be a backup to Caitlin; it sounds like she's going to have a bigger role than that. What do you expect to see out of her this year?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I've been happy with Molly. We did recruit her as the backup to Caitlin. Okay, now think about how hard that is. You are all-everything for Central Michigan. You competed against Iowa in the NCAA Tournament and had 18 points on us, and then you transfer here knowing that you're going to back up the point guard, go from playing 35 minutes a game to backing up, maybe eight minutes a game.

So we told her right up front, this is your No. 1 role, but you're also going to compete for off-guard minutes.

I've been impressed with how well she plays away from the basketball. She's crafty. She's deceiving. She's a smart basketball player. So I'm very, very excited.

I think that's going to be an X factor that people haven't figured out with our team yet.

Q. The chemistry of this team has obviously been talked about a lot over the last few years. From that standpoint, how is Molly kind of weaved into the group?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, anytime you bring newcomers in, whether they're transfers from another program or freshmen, you have to bring them up to speed on the culture of your program. It's something we talk about,



again, all the time. It's something -- we meet every other week and have really a team meeting about team dynamics with a sports psychologist on staff here.

Again, it helps when you have people that are older, that embrace your culture, so that they can pass it along, and at that point when you're coming in, it's either like, well, I can't be a jerk and wreck this -- and it feels good. Our gym feels good when you're there. Our locker room feels good when you're in it.

You don't want to mess that up. You want to be a part of that.

I'm just really happy with the way that our culture gets passed down from year to year.

Q. You have shooters on the team; where does Taylor McCabe fit in as far as being a really good outside threat for you? Is she kind of a Melissa Dixon kind of a kid?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, that's a good analogy, having her be a Melissa Dixon-type of a player where she's a knock-down shooter. Yeah, she's probably not going to do too much damage right now penetrating to the hoop because she is a little bit slight in size, and we've got some work on defense. As a freshman, she's got to work on that. But she has a quick release just like Melissa did. That's a really good analogy.

Q. At one time Caitlin was six for nine from beyond 30 feet. Who does that?

LISA BLUDER: Who keeps track of that? I don't know. I don't keep track of that.

But sometimes she's more open from 30 feet than she is from 20.

Q. When you look on your defense, what are some of the things that impacted losses? Maybe it's really hard to tell in practice, but how do you see them coming along in those two areas?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, we made a big jump last year in defense. We jumped up about 100 spots according to Synergy in our defense. So we got better. That's encouraging, but we still have a ways to go.

But at the same time, you all know I'm an offensive coach, and I'm not going to sacrifice my offense completely for defense, and I want to improve defense, and I want to improve rebounding, but I'm not going to do that at the expense of our offense.

We'll continue to be up tempo in offense. That gives your defense more opportunities to work, right, when you score the ball so quickly like we do.

I see us really focusing on defense in practice, though. I see us competing really hard defensively and them really taking it to heart when they get scored upon.

Rebounding, we need to get better on both ends, offensively and defensively, and I think it's great when you have areas that you can work on and that you can really identify those areas, and let's get better at it.

Q. Is it more of a mindset thing, those two factors, more schematics? What do you look to improve specifically in those two areas?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, last year we tweaked a lot of things in our defense that I think benefitted us. We didn't do a lot of that this year, tweaking of our defense, that is.

Offense, we're trying to make offensive rebounding just a better mindset. I think we shoot the ball so well sometimes on offense, when you're 20 feet away you think, well, we're going to make it every time. Well, we don't make it every time, so we need to get in there and get those second and third opportunities.

It's just a mentality and a discipline that we have to get better at, and we're trying to reward that in practice.

Q. Do you feel like this team is equipped a little bit more to be a better rebounding team? You get Sharon Goodman back, Addison O'Grady a year older now, Warnock, Hannah Stuelke. Do you think this team in general is built to rebound a little bit better?

LISA BLUDER: I do, and I think the depth at the center position could keep Monika a little fresher, which will help her in that rebounding area. I think Hannah Stuelke is an excellent rebounder, I think Syd is a good rebounder, McKenna has and sometimes she just hasn't gone to the boards, so we need to make sure she's always going to the boards.

Q. A little bit of a tangent here, but the NCAA is changing the format of the tournament so if you get to the Sweet 16 you're going to Washington, Oregon, or South Carolina. Just your thoughts about that? It's obviously not an optimal deal for your fans.

LISA BLUDER: No, it's not for the Midwest. I mean, really, and here we have Iowa and Iowa State both ranked in the top 10 and neither one of us, if we make it that far, would

have a chance to play in the Midwest, which is kind of sad.

You know, NCAA is trying this to try to get more neutrality within the Sweet 16 because a lot of times those regionals have been right in certain people's backyards anyway. It's not like we've had a bunch right in the Midwest as it is.

I guess it's good that we'll have a neutral place to play those games, more neutral than what it's been in the past.

Q. Do you get the sense that women's basketball is growing, knowing the fact you can get to neutral areas and still get an audience like that?

LISA BLUDER: I hope so. I think women's basketball is really growing in viewership and television, attendance at games. We're seeing it, and I think across the country we're seeing it.

I hope that is the case that we can really draw to those two Sweet 16 spots.

Q. Do you have an update on Ava?

LISA BLUDER: I can't talk about Ava because she's not a signed athlete. So I can't speak on that.

Q. Do you anticipate redshirting anybody?

LISA BLUDER: At this point, we don't, but we haven't made complete decisions on that. But we'll seek a medical redshirt for Kylie, but we don't know about any other additional redshirts.

Q. Has there been any talk at all about maybe a fifth year for any of the fourth-year kids?

LISA BLUDER: Yes. We've talked about -- we've had those conversations. I'm not ready to say who's taking it and who's not yet, but we have had those conversations.

Q. How did the injury to Kylie kind of maybe change things for your guard rotation because she did play a lot last year?

LISA BLUDER: She did, she played a lot for us and she was really oftentimes the first perimeter substitution off the bench. That was a loss for us, and she was looking so good this summer. She was playing very well. She put a lot of time into the gym this summer.

My heart just aches for her more than anything else. Anytime that you lose a player to ACL, it's just such -- it takes away a lot of their identity, a lot of their joy of being here at Iowa, and I really feel bad about that for her.

She's doing really well in her recovery, and it does change things. All those players are smart. They can count. They see where they sit now, and a lot of them know that it moved them up a spot.

Q. With three ACL tears in two years, have you been doing anything different in practice to try to prevent that?

LISA BLUDER: You know, we've always done things to try to prevent ACL tears, whether it's in our strength training room, in strengthening the quads and making sure that they have equal strength between the hamstrings and the quads, also flexibility. So are we doing anything different? No. But we have always, always worked on trying to maintain the strength and flexibility of our athletes so that they don't have these kind of injuries.

Q. Is there anybody that we don't know about that might be -- that's made a big jump this year, might be a surprise kind of up the ladder depth chart-wise?

LISA BLUDER: I think the biggest surprises will be Molly, because you just don't know her yet and you haven't seen her yet.

I think Hannah Stuelke as a freshman will really do some big things for us.

I would have said Kylie here in that question.

I think Syd has made some good -- I think Shateah is coming back well from her ACL, as well.

Q. Do you have a rotation set yet for the first two or three off the bench, or is that still in progress?

LISA BLUDER: Still in progress. We have a closed exhibition on Saturday against DePaul at DePaul, and I think that's going to be really good for us to try some different things, so that should be a lot of fun for us.

But we haven't come up with a set rotation yet, and who knows, those things can change, too, as the year goes on.

Q. You said you're going to DePaul this year. Any reason why --

LISA BLUDER: We're not playing Creighton? Do I need to explain that? A little bad taste in our mouth, obviously. You know something, DePaul is a great team. They were ranked No. 1 in the country in points per game, play in the Big East. I called Jim and explained the situation. He was great with it. He totally understood. We've been doing that

a lot of years, and it was just time for something new and especially after that situation last year.

Q. Was it just because of the fact that you played them twice somewhat recently in the NCAA Tournament that that is kind of a downside of playing them at the beginning of the year?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah. I mean, you want to play -- in the NCAA Tournament, you'd really like to play people that are unfamiliar with you, and we keep kind of running up against them because they are such a good program. Now, it could happen with DePaul again this year; you never know. They were sent to Iowa State last year. It may not do us that much good. But you're right, we've played them a couple times here.

Q. Back to the roster, are you locked into starting the same five you went with last year?

LISA BLUDER: I'm pretty locked in. You know, I'm not going to say completely because we don't have to open up until November, but right now I don't see why we wouldn't start that way.

Q. Where does Jada fit in?

LISA BLUDER: Jada fits in at the -- really we've been trying to play her at the power forward position. We'd like to have her play the 3 and the 4 in time, but again, with freshmen, I don't like to give them so many roles that they have to learn so much because they're learning a lot as it is.

Right now we're kind of focusing on the power forward position for her.

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