

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Baylor Bears

Nicki Collen

Bella Fontleroy

Jana Van Gytenbeek

Media Conference

Baylor - 67, Nebraska 62

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, what a game. I guess this is what the NCAA tournament is all about. I thought that we got tough at the end. When time was running out, I thought that's about as tough a five minutes as we've ever played. We obviously didn't shoot the basketball particularly well. We got off to the great start. I think that it really hurt us when Buggs went out. When you look at her plus-minus at plus 26, she just keeps it moving, she keeps us moving.

But I thought we found a way. I thought Ting hit big shots early and then we clipped away. But I thought it was our defense, I thought it was our intensity, I thought our ball pressure in the full court, we turned it up. We got a couple turnovers. We started playing with pace. Then we finished our free throws at the end.

So really hard-fought battle against a really good team. I thought Britt Prince carried them in the second half. Elite, elite, player. But happy to survive and advance.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. When you guys were making the run and then you draw the flagrant, I guess how did that change your energy and how did that kind of overturned call flip things for the final stretch?



BELLA FONTLEROY: I definitely think it flipped the game on its head a little bit. We had energy, we had a few really good stretches, but that just -- it gave us a little extra cushion. Whenever Taliah gets to the free-throw line we know Taliah is going to make free throws. That's why Nicki calls on her every single time. That's an opportunity.

But I think that got us in the right head space and we really continued to be aggressive and compete after that and finish the game strong.

Q. Gentleman in a, a question about the emotions. When you see another team make a run, what is said in the huddle, what is said between teammates to keep yourselves focused so then you can make a run and come back to win the game?

JANA VAN GYTENBEEK: Yeah, basketball is a game of runs. So Coach Nicki is always telling us, How are you going to respond to it? Good teams make runs. So Nebraska did today. So did we. We just responded and we kept our heads and got a stop.

BELLA FONTLEROY: I would agree. It's just kind of that -- there's always a little bit of like an, oh, crap, like, we got to get our stuff together. But at the end of the day, this group, we practice -- in practice, it's called the Sic 'Em 5. At the end of the game, we got to be communicating, we have to be together, like, in -- and like Nicki said, that was one of the toughest five-minute stretches that we've played all year. So we were ready and we did what we needed to do.

Q. Bella, how much energy does Buggs give you? That's a loaded question, I know, but especially today, how important was she when she was on the floor?

BELLA FONTLEROY: She's all the difference for our team. She's the heart of our team. The way that she pursues the ball, nobody's keeping her off the glass. You saw, they had to foul multiple times to keep her off the glass. Not only that, just when she gets to her spots and is in rhythm, she's going to knock shots down. She had some really big plays for us today, made some big free throws too. She does it all for us and she leads us vocally.



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She's just a really good player and a really good captain.

Q. I know yesterday you talked a lot about the defensive intensity. It started off really intense, but y'all ended it the way y'all needed to defensively. What can you take away from that as you look forward on Sunday?

BELLA FONTLEROY: We have to do that throughout. We have to be ready to be in our press and get up and make plays and trap and make things happen and be on a string. Whenever we're on a string, I think it's really hard to get by us, to score on us. We're a really good defensive team, so we just have to keep that intensity throughout.

Q. You go into the fourth quarter down six, win that quarter by 11. Was there a mind shift going on there? What allowed you to go on that run?

JANA VAN GYTENBEEK: I think we huddled all together, Coach included, and -- I get emotional. This so embarrassing. Anyway, we didn't want it to be our last game, so we were either going to go out in the fourth quarter and give it to 'em or take it. We took it.

Q. Going back to the flagrant foul, that was originally just called a jump ball, and then you guys appealed it. Did you feel like as soon as it happened, she had pulled you down? Did you tell coach, Hey, do you want to appeal that?

BELLA FONTLEROY: Yeah, I think they had already kind of started talking about it because Aaron is over there with the iPad and, man, is he quick with that iPad. But before I even got to turn around, they already were saying it, and I was like, Yeah, definitely do that. But at the end of the day, that's just us being aggressive, trying to make things happen.

But I'm glad that you did review it.

NICKI COLLEN: Same (laughing).

Q. Have you ever had a turnover on them claiming you stepped in bounds or was that a first?

BELLA FONTLEROY: No, I don't think so. And you know what's really crazy is every time I take the ball out, usually at the end of the game Nicki is in my ear by me, so I'm like, Okay, Nicki call a timeout. Something's wrong.

But right after that happened, I looked at Jana, and I said, It's okay. We're going to get a stop. Like, it didn't frazzle us because we were so locked in and in the zone, we knew that whatever mistake any one of us made we were going

to have each other's back and make something happen, and sure enough we did.

Q. How impressive has Ella been the last couple games, like, sparing you a little bit and then giving you some breather?

JANA VAN GYTENBEEK: Yeah, Ella has saved our butts a few times this season. She always works hard. She's also my best friend, so it means even more. She comes in and she does what she needs to do. She is fast, she's a good leader, she's a good teammate, she's positive. She did that again today, so proud of her.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse you to the locker room and take questions for Coach.

Q. Following up again on the flagrant foul, you can correct me on this, but TV said you didn't have a timeout, so I guess if you didn't win the appeal --

NICKI COLLEN: We had four timeouts at that point, so I hadn't -- believe me, anyone who watches Baylor play, I'm going to have my full complement of timeouts at the end of the game, unless, you know, it's, like, a 10-, 12-0 run.

So, no, I knew that was the risk, but at that point I thought timing-wise and the importance that that could be, the momentum shift, that both Aaron and Michael were really confident that she had pulled her down. So the worst thing that was going to happen to us was we were going to get the ball. But when you think about it, we got the ball, we saved the arrow, so that possession arrow stayed ours.

We get Talia going to the line, and we ended up with a three-point possession because then Buggs got fouled and made one out of two. So, no, we had a full complement of timeouts there.

Q. Jana said that she didn't want this to be the last for the seniors. Did Buggs come into this game maybe a little bit extra determined? It seemed like right from the jump she had a little different look in her eye.

NICKI COLLEN: Really? I mean, I just see that from Buggs every game. Like, I think -- I look at Colorado and I thought she gave every ounce that she had in that game. Maybe she didn't make her pullup in that game, but I just -- when you look at what Buggs does for us -- and I mean, the plus-minus is unfair sometimes, it really is. Like, it could be just you're playing well and you get in with a wrong group and somebody gets hot.

But we just -- we're different. The ball doesn't stick, we play with pace. When Buggs is in the game, she gets us in

action. No one's ever standing around looking. There late at the end -- late in the shot clock she got into a late ball screen, Jana hit her on the roll, she gets fouled. She's just a playmaker. She's just an unbelievable playmaker. She puts length on the ball.

I think the big jump for Buggs this year, and really her progression in her career, is the way we have utilized her defensively. I can tell you, we were hiding her at times in her career and now she made the All Defensive team and we put her on Britt Prince. So it just kind of shows the evolution of her understanding. She always competed at a high level, but her knowledge of what's happening.

But, yeah, I don't think that group -- you know, the question was asked about that fourth quarter timeout, and I looked at that circle and said -- I mean, we had -- I'm still calling Kyla a senior because she came in with that group. But it was those four and Talia, and I just said, You guys got 10 minutes left, that's it, in your career. You got 10 minutes left in your career. How do you want it to go? Like, it's up to you guys. How do you want it to go? And you've got to play like it is the last 10 minutes of your career. I thought they did. I really thought they did.

Q. In the fourth quarter early in that frame, you guys were down nine. From there, what goes right for you that maybe wasn't going right in the third quarter?

NICKI COLLEN: I thought -- I think our defensive pressure was really good early. And then I think the -- you start to get a little bit tired, and then you don't get a denial, and then you have a breakdown here or a breakdown there. I thought, you know, when you know it's it -- you know, sometimes you'll ask the question like, why don't you press like that more often? It's, like, you can't. You can't play like your hair's on fire for 40 minutes, like, not unless you're going to play 12 people.

So I thought we played like our hair was on fire. I thought our full-court pressure bothered 'em. I thought we rebounded, and we really ran the floor. We missed some shots, but I thought our tempo was better. I got to get to -- you know, for me, when it comes down to the last five minutes and I get to play a possession game and they're in front of me, it's, like, here we go, right? Here we go. Like, that's like my sandbox, and I'm just playing in the sandbox.

So as long as we can keep it close, our team knows that I'm going to get 'em in actions that give 'em the space to play in. Whether it was a stagger curl to downhill and Talia gets fouled, whether it's Buggs in middle ball screen, which we hadn't run all game long, Talia with some ghost action where she doesn't have to worry about a hard hedge. I think we got in our sandbox and we made free throws.

So that's when it's fun for me. Not that it's not fun all the time, but, like, when we get in time and score, like, that's why I do what I do.

Q. Maybe full-game Talia didn't necessarily look like herself in the first couple quarters, but did you see the signs you needed to see from her in those last couple minutes?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I thought when she missed the three in front of our bench, I just knew that one was going in. Like, I just thought that would make it a two-possession game because I think she has that. She's got that it. She can have the worst game of her life, but there's going to be no fear in making that play. That's why the ball's in her hands on free throws, that's why the ball's in her hands. Her play downhill to keep creating the two-possession separation or the three-point angle, you know, that we needed.

So I'm going to keep playing to her. We are here because of -- a big part because of her, and we're not going to abandon what we do in the biggest game so far of our season. So I was proud of her, the downhill drive, the free throws, you know, she stuck with it. When you think about the difference in the game, it was the offensive rebounding. Like, it was free throws and offensive rebounding and one led to the other a lot of the time.

So she misses that three, we run down the rebound, we get another possession. I thought that one goes in and that creates a separation we need, but ultimately getting that rebound was just as valuable.

Q. Just to kind of look ahead a little bit, you played Duke in your season opener, but I got to imagine that at this point you're a different team and they're a different team. It's probably just a whole new scout, right?

NICKI COLLEN: You know, I think -- I'll say this. I think Duke was elite when we played 'em. I think they're elite now. So I think when we played Duke, they were 7th in the country, they were riding the high of being in the Elite 8 and, let's be honest, like, a possession away from the Final Four a year ago. I think we got a really confident Duke. I think we maybe didn't quite know who we were yet. So were we different? I don't know. I think who we are today was the same team we were against Duke, a team that's going to rely on our ability to defend and play with tempo and get downhill and a piece of the paint.

We thought our advantage today was our athleticism, and I don't think we played to it enough in the first half. I thought

we settled. We didn't get a piece of the paint. I think in the first half, we were 55 percent with a paint touch and 20 percent without it, and 0 percent in the second quarter without a paint touch.

So we have to understand who we are, but I think Duke's just back to being the team that everybody knew they were going to be when we played 'em the first time. Are they confident? Did they deal with Donovan and Skinner not ending up. But the kids that are playing now are the same ones that we played against. Now, do I think they're confident right now? Of course. And they should be. They had an unbelievable season. But I think they were always good, always good.

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