

HNTF Presents: The Kate Peterson Abiad Interview

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Saturday, March 20 2010 8:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, April 14 2010 8:15 AM



The Cleveland State Vikings are going to the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three years!

Wait, you thought they lost in the Horizon League Tournament? Well, sure, the Men's team did.

But the Women's team blew past top seed Wisconsin-Green Bay and higher-seeded Butler to capture another Tournament title, and were rewarded with a trip to South Bend, Indiana to face a Notre Dame team that has lost only 5 games this season ... and 3 of them were to Connecticut, which consists entirely of Norse gods, changelings, and cyborgs from the future.

Some reward.

I got the opportunity to talk with Coach Kate Peterson Abiad, now in her 7th season as head coach of the Vikings. However, because my interviewing skills have not improved significantly from last year, Coach Peterson Abiad's quotes will be liberally paraphrased, unless someone can explain why I wrote "Klun noor WI bonder" in my notes.

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Peterson Abiad came to Cleveland State in 2003 after spending years as an assistant coach at various locations. I will point you to the excellent [CSU Web Page bio](#) for the details. Although her philosophies did not immediately bear fruit, by which I mean “went 4-25 in her third season,” the Vikings have now won the Horizon League Tournament two of the last three years and made the semis in each year. I sat down with Peterson Abiad, which actually means I talked with her on my cell phone while smoking in the parking garage. The thousand-mile distance between us is at least partially responsible for her talking with Terry Pluto yesterday instead of calling me, the other part being ... dude ... he’s

Terry Pluto

, and I’m a guy smoking in a parking garage.

Q: I have to ask: how does a team go from four wins to an NCAA bid in three years?

A: When I started at Cleveland State, I had spent 12 years as an assistant coach, but had no head coaching experience. You know, you get started and have your own theories about how a team ought to be built and how it should play, and you get a chance to test those theories out, but yes, 4-25 is pretty tough to go through.

Note: Peterson Abiad absorbed a 2-win season at Eastern Illinois as an assistant. The subsequent improvement of that team (see the bio linked above) may have given Peterson Abiad some solace that, hey, the 2005-6 CSU team was, objectively speaking, twice as good.

A (cont.): But I had a lot of supportive people around me, giving me good advice and encouragement, and we stuck with the same 5-man motion offense and man defense the whole time, which really helped. We could start recruiting the right kind of players that would fit into the system. And when you bring in new players and the players who have been in the system can teach them what to look for and where to go, it becomes a lot easier.

If you want to ask, “What’s the difference between 4-25 and the NCAA Tournament,” I have to say the answer is, “Get better players.”

But it helps when those players show the leadership you need: our senior captains this season were made captains as sophomores two years ago, and at the League Tournament, they said, “This was our team two years ago, and it’s still our team now.”

Q: Speaking of the Horizon League Tournament, I understand that it was the win over Butler that got you to The Dance, but in some ways the semi-final win over Green Bay was more impressive. Green Bay had just beaten you a week earlier, beat you twice in the regular season, and was playing on their home floor. How do you do that?

A: We did the same thing two years ago, so it felt very similar. We’d lost to them twice in the regular season that year as well, and the Tournament was in Green Bay that year too. We won that game, so our players felt like it was the same situation. They have a terrific crowd up in Green Bay, some 3000+, and maybe 150 were rooting for Cleveland State, but a crowd like that can really energize your team, and we fed off that. With the senior leadership and the fact that we’d done it two years ago, there wasn’t any reason to feel intimidated or lack confidence.

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In all honesty, we don't play in front of crowds. So when we get in front of a large, enthusiastic crowd, it gives us a lot of energy. It's nice to be able to go into Green Bay and win, though: they were something like 28-2 in their last couple seasons at home, so it's nice that we make up both of those "2."

This is outstanding pointed speech, by the way. The Vikings CAN play in front of crowds, but they DON'T play in front of crowds. Go to a game.

Q: I don't get to watch the Horizon League: in Texas, we are pretty much fed Big Twelve basketball, which is all about size and power, players like Courtney Paris and Brittany Griner. How would you describe the Horizon's style?

A: Well, no, we aren't going to get those players. We're not going to get the 6'3", 6'5" players. We're the only team in the Horizon that plays a real 5-man motion offense, everyone else will use a post player, even if they aren't as big. We have players who can *guard* in the post, but we don't generally use a post-up player on offense.

What makes a team like Green Bay so effective is that they play with a lot of confidence, using good shooters and scorers in a very systematic offense. They never seem to have that one great player, but as a team, they play as well as anyone.

Q: With the exception of Kailey Klein, does that describe Cleveland State as well?

A: Well, Kailey is certainly our main player: she creates opportunities for everyone as well as scoring, but our team is really built on the motion offense with tough man defense.

Q: I have to ask: you have four players from Ontario, Canada, and one from Ohio. Is that an indictment of high school basketball in Ohio, or are you exploiting a sort of "Moneyball" inefficiency in the Canadian market?

A: If you look at the players we've brought in, many of them come from the contacts I've made in Wisconsin, especially the Milwaukee area

...

Note: Peterson Abiad is a graduate of Wisconsin-Steven's Point and was an assistant at Wisconsin (Madison).

A (cont): ... Kailey Klein is from Illinois, but near the Wisconsin border ...

Aha! THAT'S what "Klun noor WI bonder" means!

A (cont): ... and the Canadian players, well, the men signed a Canadian player and we ended up recruiting his sister. She didn't come to CSU, but I made AAU and prep contacts there, and when we got the Roque twins to come, that gave us a foothold in that part of the world.

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But really, I would love to sign more Ohio players. The fact is, there are 12 Division One schools in Ohio, and when I started, you would have to objectively put Cleveland State near the bottom in terms of desirability. We would absolutely love to have more Ohio players, and that's a priority for us, but truthfully, we haven't been able to attract the best players yet, so that's something we're working on. Making the NCAA Tournament will help there.

Q: Your husband is an assistant coach with the volleyball team at CSU: a lot of the best high school athletes play both sports. Do you ever find yourself competing for the same recruit?

A: That's not uncommon at all, and in fact, if you get a player who can do both, basketball will pay for it. We have more scholarships than the volleyball program, so we'll foot the bill. Absolutely, we recently both went after a player who would have been great at either sport, but she ended up going to another school. But once he went to scout a volleyball player at a basketball game, and texted me, "This girl has 28 points, and it's not halftime yet!" You better believe I recruited her. Now she plays volleyball, and says, "Oh, I'm no good at basketball," which is clearly untrue, but ... the seasons run at different times with some overlap, kind of the worst possible scenario, so it would be very difficult for a college athlete to commit to playing both sports.

Q: Do you have bragging rights in your house since you won your conference tournament and his team lost in the finals?

A: (calls out to her husband) Do I have bragging rights since we're going to the NAAs?

Husband: No.

A: He says no. But, you know, there were some years when the volleyball team was very good and the basketball team was bad, and through all of that he's been very supportive. Not only do we get to talk things through from the perspective of different sports, but also we can get each other's perspective as a head coach or an assistant coach.

Q: I see you have two degrees in psychology: do you get a chance to use those as a coach?

A: Oh, definitely. Every day. For example, I can gauge the team's emotional status when they come in for practice, and I can choose whether to challenge them with working on a weakness that could be very frustrating, or whether it would be better to build up their confidence by working on something we do really well. I can keep up with how the players are doing in their personal lives, how they're feeling, what kind of academic load they're shouldering at any given time, and adjust the way I coach based on that. In a sense, coaching and psychology are closely related.

Q: Looking at your matchup with Notre Dame, they seem like a "Yeah, but..." team. They only have three players averaging double digits and no one who averages as many as 14 PPG, but they have eight who average at least 5. They don't shoot all that well (45%, 34.1% from 3), but they force opponents to shoot really poorly (40.8%, 31.8%). If I had to pick two things, it would be that they force an ugly number of turnovers and take way more free throws than their

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opponents. How do you hope to go in and try to take the home crowd out of the game?

A: Frankly, I hope the home crowd stays IN the game. An energetic crowd would be the best thing for us.

And, as I walk away after thanking Coach Peterson Abiad for the interview, I regret forgetting to ask two questions:

1. Is UConn's dominance good or bad for Women's Basketball?
2. As a Steven's Point grad, do you talk extra smack to the other, lesser flavors of UW like Green Bay, Whitewater, and Milwaukee? Like, "Aw, couldn't get into Steven's Point or Madison, huh? Well, maybe you can transfer next year."

I'm gonna go out on a limb and think this doesn't happen.

(I don't regret not asking if she's planning to raise her daughter in a Skinner Box.)