

Pac-12 Conference Basketball Media Day

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San Francisco, California, USA

Oregon State Beavers

Coach Scott Rueck

Talia von Oelhoffen

Bendu Yeane

Women's Head Coach



SCOTT RUECK: Well, great to be back. Nice to see all your faces. We enter this year with certainly lots of new faces on the roster, but with lots of optimism. I like this group a lot. I like the way they're coming together. I like the character of the group. I like the talent level of the group.

Historically I've never minded lots of new faces, having lots of success in years where that's been the case. This group gives me a lot of confidence.

Certainly Talia is not a new face, Jelena is not a new face, A.J. and Noelle have experience, and we're fortunate to add Bendu, fortunate to add Shalexus, both with deep histories already at this level in this conference.

And then a very talented recruiting class, the third ranked recruiting class in the country.

So that group is coming along, already comfortable with each other, within our program, and within our system.

We're excited about what's ahead.

Q. Scott, how is it that you're so comfortable with change like this? For a lot of coaches it takes a while to build chemistry. It might even feel a little disruptive. But your comfort level with this, where does that come from?

SCOTT RUECK: Well, thank you. This is year 27 for me as a head coach. I have experience at lots of different things now. A couple of my most successful years as a D-III coach, I had 10 true freshmen. One went to the Elite 8, one went 32-0 and won a National Championship.

Coming into Oregon State with walk-ons in year one, being

competitive almost every night that season taught me not to limit anyone, to have high expectations for everyone in the program, whether it's their first year, their fourth year.

To expect -- well, this is a year of their life. I'm going to expect you to perform to your capabilities, build you up, give you confidence, put you in situations to be successful, and build a system that fits that group.

So historically, looking back, my experiences have prepared me for that, and so when I look at this group, there's talent. There's character. There's a desire. There's leadership. We have bigs. We have guards. We have the pieces.

So as a teacher, it just excites me to go into this year and see what we can do when there are some unknowns and there is some doubt most likely. I kind of feel like that's my wheelhouse in a way. For that reason, I'm very excited.

Q. There's been a lot of talk today about inter-conference movement with the Pac-12, transfer portal, everything like that. To add a player like Bendu, who you recruited, what's that been like to have her? And then for you Bendu, what's it been like coming home and what do you hope to bring to this team?

SCOTT RUECK: You know, that was a time of the year where I was hitting refresh on the portal every other minute it felt like as we were just seeing what our options were to fill out our roster at the time.

When I saw that name pop up, it took about one second. The next second was getting a hold of Bendu and just wondering what her status was and what she wanted to do. I was so pleased to hear that we were a place that she would consider.

I've always loved Bendu ever since she was a freshman in high school and I watched her play for the first time. Been a fan of hers through her high school career at Indiana, at Arizona. I've always thought the world of her. It's been fun and difficult to compete against her, so for her to partner with us now, I couldn't be happier.

She brings joy and energy to the gym every day, a big smile, a defensive presence and a mindset that to be honest we've been lacking the last couple years.

I asked her on her visit, I said, Bendu, what's your favorite thing to do on a basketball court, and she goes, Coach, I like to pressure the ball. That's a beautiful thing for a coach to hear and a rare thing for a coach to hear. She's been nothing short of a dream to add to this team. Very grateful.

BENDU YEANEY: I've been super happy coming back home. It was something that I've always dreamed of, and at the time when I was younger I wanted to spread my wings but then when I realized spreading my wings I always wanted to come back home every time. I'm just so fortunate that I'm able to come back home and be able to coach by Coach Scott. It's just a dream come true.

Then what I'm going to be bringing to the team? Just like a defensive mind. I'm going to go out there and do everything to get our team to win. I've been very successful at every place I've been, so I'm just going to use my leadership and my experience and just try to keep leading this team.

Q. Scott, for the players, let's go for Talia first, you're a very good player, big scorer, and your coach and you have a lot of changes and a new player next to you. What freshmen are you counting on as a returning player to count on right now? If you had a game tonight, to be a significant addition or contribute to your team?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Honestly, I think all five freshmen are going to be huge for us. They're all going to contribute and all have impacts in their own ways. They're a super talented group. I've been really impressed with Raegan Beers so far. She's a really strong force in the post. But all five of them definitely are going to get some big minutes and contribute for us this year.

Q. Bendu, I know you're a great defensive player, but the philosophies of how you played at Arizona and now at Oregon State, they're both defensive minded, right, but they're different, so for you and for Scott -- are you going to pressure the ball more than you have before, Scott? Are you going to let her go full court? What are you going to do?

BENDU YEANEY: I hope so.

SCOTT RUECK: Well, I think the last perimeter player that would identify as a defensive player that we've had is Gabby Hanson, and Gabby pressured the ball and Gabby

picked up full and Gabby impacted every possession and dictated tempo for us and bought Ruth Hamlin time to get back on defense and was totally disruptive.

Because of that, we have a model, and that is what I like to do. We just have to do what we're capable of doing each year.

So Bendu allows us to be a little bit more like what I'd love to be.

Q. Just to follow up with Bendu, because Scott is like a master of drawing plays up -- you are. You're like one of the best.

SCOTT RUECK: Thank you.

Q. Is that a lot different for you, like your playbook and knowing all the plays and the reads?

BENDU YEANEY: No, I honestly could tell you my playbook from Indiana still, from Arizona. I pick up on things really fast. Having a bunch of plays isn't too hard for me.

Q. This is probably the youngest team that you've had since you came to Oregon State. I know you talked about those challenges when you were at George Fox. What is the challenge when you have a big playbook with lots of different actions and options teaching all the new players what to do, especially as freshmen in a very intricate system like you have?

SCOTT RUECK: Well, I think my job as a teacher, and that's how I view that role, my coaching role is I'm a teacher, is to put the student in position to be successful, and so too much too soon doesn't help. That clouds the mind. So simplify as often as possible.

The biggest challenge I think for a young team is just believing that they can. So putting them in position to be successful, practice winning, practice success all the time, and keep it simple. Coach it up and go as fast as possible, and then add when you can.

So that's been a philosophy of mine. There are certain teams that are veteran where we can get super entry rat, and there's a time and place for that. Bendu is right on. She's picked things up so quickly. You never know how that's going to go, but this group has problem solved well. They feel very comfortable in the gym. They communicate well. It's everybody talking.

I feel like we're going to really grow quickly, and as you know, if you look at our schedule, we've got some tough

tests right away with our schedule. Because of that, those will be catalysts to quick growth for this group.

Q. Scott, when you've been in this conference for as long as you have, there's some in the conference who have clearly been here a little bit longer than you in that way, but you remember --

SCOTT RUECK: Just one.

Q. You remember what life was like before the Pac-12 networks in that regard. How has recruiting changed and the exposure for a program in Corvallis relatively speaking on a smaller scale? How much has the Pac-12 networks and the opportunities you guys have had on television changed from your first year to now here as you enter your 13th?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, well, I think the network has been great for women's basketball, no question. For our fans to be able to see every game -- I remember year one I think we had one game on TV and it was our Oregon game down there, and then a year later or two years later we had 15, 16, something like that, and all of a sudden we're on all the time.

That certainly helps. What ultimately helps is winning, and so we came in with a vision. The vision was just a vision. Some people knew my background, but not many people really think much of George Fox and D-III in this world, and so winning at Oregon State and having success and being competitive night in and night out really moved the needle for us.

That gained interest, and then the network assisted by allowing people to watch us more frequently. But the winning is what I think really ultimately got the attention necessary for recruiting.

Q. So you didn't take that then to I know you guys had a big game -- I remember watching you on ESPN2 when you hosted Oregon. How much can that extra bit, going to a national audience on a major network, is there a noticeable difference for you in that regard, too?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, I mean, that night Kara Lawson says on ESPN, Gill, you stole my heart, you know, that day because of that game. You build towards those pinnacle moments.

It's an amazing place to watch a game. It's an amazing place -- it should be on TV. The games that we play within our rivalries, Stanford, our first-ever sell out in 2017 was crazy. We hosted Tennessee. Had 8,200 in Gill, the year

before in 2015, winter or, or December of. Those moments are also massive catalysts for recruiting, when people can say, oh, that program has arrived. They belong. They can play with the best.

Q. Scott, correct me if I'm wrong, but the PK85 tournament, I don't know women's college basketball has had a regular season tournament quite like that one with eight teams. You and Oregon are both playing in that. What do you think is the impact of that tournament, playing it this year, and perhaps making this sort of a regular thing maybe other places?

SCOTT RUECK: Well, I think it's a great opportunity. I think the fact that it's in Portland is fantastic for beaver nation. I think that's amazing. Anytime that you can play against great elite talent it's going to make you better.

I love playing against really good teams early. You learn about yourself. You learn everything is exposed. Your strengths are exposed and your weaknesses are very obvious.

So that tournament will provide us that opportunity. If it leads to more later, that's fantastic. But for an area of the country that loves women's basketball like the state of Oregon, the northwest in general, I mean, it's an ideal scenario, so we're very excited and honored to be participating.

Q. Scottie, when you've visited with us over the years we've always talked about the development of the post players under your tutelage. You lose a couple of bigs, but watching what Mitrovic has been able to do over the course of her career has been pretty special. Could you talk about Mitrovic's growth and development, and ladies, would you help us understand what it's like to play with someone that big whose skill level continues to grow?

SCOTT RUECK: Jelena is on pace. It's just exactly what we probably hoped for in best case scenario. Maybe a little slower than we would hope. However, if you think about Jelena's injuries, she's had knee caps that have been displaced and that's a family thing. The same thing happened to her brother who's a pro in Serbia.

That has been corrected, fixed, and now it's been fixed for two and a half years. So she's been able to develop strength in a part of her body that she wasn't confident in, wasn't strong in.

So in my opinion, this is really the second year of her life that she's been able to actually play basketball where you can get down low and you can jump and you can play on

balance.

So it's just amazing for us who have been in the gym with her for a while to watch her evolve and learn how fun this game is.

Instead of every step being cautious or painful, it's joyful. It's like -- I mean, she's almost like -- I'm not going to say prancing, but what's one notch below that? That's what Jelena is doing right now.

So quicker, able to make double-effort plays on the defensive end of the floor, and now just so much stronger on offense where the ball stays high because she can keep it high and finish on balance.

She's developed her -- she's always been a shooter, so she can shoot the three. It's just higher percentage now. She's on balance more. She's quicker into screens. She's quicker to offensive rebounds. She's quicker on defense. Her evolution has just been a joy to watch.

I couldn't be happier for her because she is a basketball player that happens to be 6'9". She's not just this tall kid that plays basketball.

Anybody that loves the game like she does, you just want them to have that joy out there, and that's what we're seeing.

Q. Ladies, could you talk about playing with her?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think when you watch her play it's easy to get caught up in she's 6'9", she's so tall, all those things. But really like what you can't take away from her is how skilled she is. She's one of the most skilled players that I've ever played with, and it's just so cool to see someone that size make plays that some guards can't make.

She's so smart. Her game just continues to grow. Like he said, she's so much more on balance, so much stronger, in better shape.

So it's been cool over the last year and a half going into this year just to see her development, and I remember coming in my senior year and just in practice making passes to her. I've never had to throw it that high for someone before, so I just remember Coach Scott just having to have like, you can get it up there. Like I wasn't throwing it high enough.

Just to have someone like that to play with is amazing, and just her maturity this year is so much different and how she approaches things, because obviously she was blessed

with height, but to really see her work as though things weren't given to her, and she was blessed with that.

She's just an amazing player, but it's just great to have someone of that size and skill and maturity on your team.

BENDU YEANEY: Yeah, she has really good hands. That's something I've been really impressed with. You pass it up there and she's grabbing it and it's really hard to get it out of her hands. Also she's a really good passer. Like a really extremely good passer.

So it's been really fun being able to throw up kind of, not really lobs, but they're lobs to her, and just seeing how she can catch it and finish.

If you're not watching she's going to throw you a good bounce back, and I've just been super impressed. But I love playing with her.

Q. You mentioned spreading your wings a little bit ago, Bendu. I'm curious what you learned more as an individual rather than a player from that experience and what maybe that could help you -- now that you're coming back to this team, and then for you, Talia, how your role might change or what you might learn from playing with Bendu, especially on the defensive end.

BENDU YEANEY: Honestly, I think when I went to college, I wasn't as confident as I am now, and I think it just built my confidence every stop I've been. I've been more and more confident and now I'm back in my comfort zone being in Oregon, so I'm the most confident I've ever been in my life.

All my experiences obviously have been good and everything has been God's plan, and I'm happy that I ended up where I needed to end up.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, and for me, it's been great to play with Bendu, even though it's her first year in this program. Like you said, she's been at Indiana, Arizona, played in some really big games and has a lot of experience just in college, so there's a lot to learn from her.

I think both of us as leaders, her experience in college and my experience within our system and our program combined has been just amazing. We play really well together. With her defense specifically, it's kind of just inspiring to watch how dedicated she is to it and how much it means to her and how important that side of the floor is.

It makes it really easy to embrace that side of the floor and play better defense, and she just makes everyone around her, everyone on the court, everyone watching better. It's just been great so far.

