

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

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Oregon State Beavers Coach Scott Rueck

Postgame Press Conference

Oregon State - 71, Oregon - 64

COACH RUECK: I mean, we just talked about it: Did we see ourselves in the Pac-12 semifinal a month ago? You know, the obvious answer would have been no. We were so disjointed at the time. Our season had been so frustrating without games that it was hard to envision what the potential of this team could be, because we hadn't had a chance to really experience it.

I think somebody told me yesterday that this is the second time all year that we've played five consecutive games. And this is the most we've played in a row. So we're hopeful that we can tip off tomorrow in the semifinal and that game gets the green light. And that will be new for us, six games in a row.

And so obviously we knew it was going to take a big effort today. Oregon's a great team, very well coached. We knew just because of the recent game on Sunday that we played against them that there was going to be a bit of a chess match, as we tried to figure out, you know, what their game plan was going to be and what their adjustments and what our adjustments were going to be.

We knew there was going to be a feeling-out period in this game a little bit. It lasted a little bit longer than we had hoped. The first quarter was interesting, to say the least, probably on both sides. But then we both settled in.

That third quarter was special. We had great performances throughout our roster. The other day we had six players that finished in double figures. Today we had four with two with eight points. And to beat really good teams you have to -- it's best to have scoring come from all over. That's what I challenged the team with, stay aggressive.

And, so, we got that lead in the third and, of course, Oregon's not going to go anywhere. They're going to come back, they've got so much talent. And Mikesell was really



special today, and Nyara was special today in keeping them close and making it a competitive game to the very end. And I was just proud of the team for making the plays and really happy and proud of them that they get to continue on in the tournament.

Q. The start to the game, the first quarter, did you feel like the shots were good, they just weren't falling, and eventually they would fall?

COACH RUECK: No. (Laughs) that's one of the things we talked about, though, I thought our shot selection was poor. I thought our overall execution was poor. And you have to give Oregon a lot of credit for that. They had a lot of energy starting this game. We knew they would.

We beat them three days ago, or four days ago now. And so we were aware that they probably had three very focused practices getting ready for this game. And they looked like that.

They came out and disrupted us. I thought we were sped up a little bit because of the way that they were playing and that led to poor execution overall and poor shots.

This team shoots the ball very well -- as you all have seen -- when we are in our rhythm, playing at our pace and executing like we're capable of. But we were feeling out what the game was going to be like.

And so I thought Oregon's defense controlled that first quarter for us. And it took us a while to adjust to it. And so give them a lot of credit for that.

Q. You shot 12 out of 15 in the third quarter. Did you feel like the second quarter was what kind of got things going?

COACH RUECK: For sure. I thought there was a shot that -- Aleah hit that three, I think it was at the end of the first quarter or early second? I can't remember. I remember it being the end of the first quarter but it might not have been.

But I thought that was a big shot for us, just kind of a shot in the arm for the team. And it just maybe just got us



going, I think. This is what we do. This is normal. And then it was that second quarter, obviously we found our rhythm and remembered who we were and played very good basketball, I felt, on both ends of the floor that second quarter.

Q. How important was your defense there in that first quarter? I know sometimes when you're not scoring, you might lax on defense, but you guys kept it within striking distance. Sometimes I felt like it felt like you guys were down 10, 15, and you guys were down five at the end of that quarter. How important was it for you guys to play that defense in that quarter and play it the rest of the game?

COACH RUECK: You said 10 or 15, and I told the team it felt like 20. That's how that quarter felt. It felt like they got the shots they wanted. For the most part it felt like we were on our heels the whole time, disjointed.

I thought it was amazing, actually, that we were only down five at that time for the way the game felt for us. Our defense is so much better. Our posts did a really good job impacting shots and we rebounded well. That was the reason -- I don't know what the rebounds were, but we were up six at halftime. The other day we got outrebounded by five at Oregon. And that was maybe the stat of the game, I felt today. We needed to win the boards against this team. I don't know if we did. But at least we were up during that stretch.

And I think the defensive rebound was the only reason we were in the game at the end of the first quarter.

Q. The third quarter, was that as well as you had played offensively this season?

COACH RUECK: Well, it felt a lot like Sunday's game, to me. I mean, it was just everybody was so aggressive. They were switching defenses. They ran three different defenses that quarter.

And our guards did such a great job handling it, getting us into our offense against each defense. And then the ball moved so well. So we got such good looks. But Taya really stepped up in that quarter. And it's hard to do better than those numbers you just shared.

I don't know if we've been better than that for a stretch, but it felt very similar to the third quarter the other day -- similar timing, similar segment of the game where we separated on the scoreboard.

Q. The play of Jelena today -- she's been playing really well of late -- but how key was that? Eight points, six

rebounds, 4-of-5 from the floor, (indiscernible). You didn't have to have Taylor off the floor, but you could go with Jelena and she provided a lot for you today?

COACH RUECK: She's a great change up. They're just so different. The other day we used Jele in there as well. And Jovana is very similar to Jele in the way she plays. So, we have three completely different looks at the center spot for us.

And Taylor's Taylor and now Jelena is figuring out who she is late in her fake freshman year or whatever we're calling it. But Jelena is such a skilled basketball player. It just takes time to get with the speed of the game, what you can get away with, what you can't get away with, how to be strong and maintain balance through contact. All those things.

And the team is learning that. I think today we found her right times, gave her good looks around the basket. But she's going to change shots all game long. And she has such a great knack for knowing where the ball's going to be and such good hands that she's an impactful player, let alone the assists and she had obviously a beautiful assist, I think, to Talia at the rim. Just a dynamic player that's coming into her own obviously at a great time for us.

Q. To throw a few more logs on this weird season, you had the lowest scoring quarter of your season and the highest scoring quarter of your season all in one game.

COACH RUECK: That's insane. That's crazy. So the third quarter how many did we have?

Q. 31 in the third. That's your high. Five in the first. That's your low.

COACH RUECK: (Laughs), yeah, it's a season of Twilight Zone, I guess, but no surprise. Crazy.

Q. The third quarter, it looked like you were trying to get the ball to Jones, ran a couple of pick-and-rolls there with Aleah. Was that one of the things you were trying to do was get Jones involved?

COACH RUECK: Not necessarily. I think you just want to take what they give you. And that was kind of the theme of the day is take what they give us.

And those on-ball screens, that was the missing ingredient to the beginning of the game. We had a hard time getting to those screens and therefore didn't have the advantages that we could have gotten with better execution. The third quarter I thought we challenged the team with execution at

halftime. And certainly Oregon was scoring in that third quarter as well, to start with, especially, and so then we had to answer that.

And so our execution was excellent. And our guards have the ability to come off and score either over the top of it if they go under or hit the pull up or go to the rim and finish. When that five is rolling hard like that, that makes them a threat as well either they're open or it skews the help. And so I thought we just executed much better, clearly executed much better than that third quarter.

Q. Last couple of years you had second session of games, 6:00 and 8:00 o'clock window usually. Does preparation change at all when you're the 11.00 a.m. window and you can sit and watch everybody else play?

COACH RUECK: We always talk about it doesn't matter where or when. And I told the team this morning, 11.00 a.m. doesn't matter. It's just game time is when game time is.

For coaches, the prep is a challenge, the earlier you play, in my opinion. And so shoot-around is earlier usually. It's at an hour you probably wouldn't choose if you had the choice but it doesn't matter. 5:00 is, the evening session is just more normal.

I'm one that doesn't believe a basketball game should ever start before noon. It's just the nature of the sport is an afternoon, usually an evening sport.

So I think the team's going to appreciate a little extra time maybe sleeping in an extra hour or two tomorrow morning as we prepare. And there's no down time. This is the toughest week of the year for a coaching staff because you're playing against people who know you better than anybody. You're challenged, it's all the rivalries. It's just intense.

When else do we play three games in three days? And usually it's four games in four days, potentially anyway. And so we never do this at any other time of the year. And it's taxing on everyone. But that's a little bit of the charm of it and fun of the challenge.

Q. What does this win mean to you, the significance behind it, not only to beat your rivals twice in a week, to win the season series against your rivals, but also to basically put to bed any thoughts that you guys don't belong in the NCAA Tournament?

COACH RUECK: I hope we had already done that before today but you never know, right? And so what it means to

me is that I'm just -- I'm just so happy for our team. You always want to beat your rivals, of course. Beaver Nation, I'm part of it. And so there's nothing more rewarding in my job than to see our players achieve like they have, come together as a group and conquer and see those faces after a win like this, when I know all the work that goes into it.

And then to take care of our fans and to take care of the people that love us. Nothing's more enjoyable for me personally than that.

The fact that it was Oregon today, sure, I mean obviously there's something special there. And that would be probably true of anybody in their rivalry game.

What I'm most happy about, though, is just this team has gone through the craziest year, as obviously well-documented. And to get to this point, have an opportunity tomorrow night in the Pac-12 semifinal, not only to advance to the championship and have another opportunity to win, but maybe if it took this one to cement our spot in the NCAA Tournament, I mean that's why they came here to do these types of things.

And this is a team full of -- at every level of this team, no matter what your role is in our program -- it's full of winners, and that have done nothing but had success in their life, work hard, take care of each other and do things right. I'm just most happy for them.

Q. Talia got a little fired up on that and-one that she got in the third quarter. I think the ref said something to her. I wonder what it was like to see a freshman be that aggressive and fearless and maybe talk a little trash, maybe that's what she was doing. Hard to know.

COACH RUECK: I don't see her doing that. I see her fired up, though. This is a northwest athlete that understands what this rivalry is. She's been watching our program now for six years, something like that.

And so now she's a part of it. I can relate. The first time I was in it I had some of the same emotions. You also see just an ultimate competitor and a warrior on the floor that has lived her whole life for these moments. And now she's getting to experience them. So these are dreams come true for her.

And so, yeah, seeing her pump her fist and get fired up, I mean, who doesn't love that? That's what this is.

And so this is a team full of very competitive people. And that's the reason we're here. That's the reason that we were able to weather the droughts and games all year long and be playing our best basketball right now.

But to see a freshman do that, Lindsay, you know me well enough to know that's kind of what I expect from them. And we see Sasha do the same, and we've seen Savannah do the same.

And now I think Jelena is owning it a little bit and understanding it all. So it's awesome to see.

Q. If your team didn't go through those pauses and have all those breaks do you think you would be at this point be able to play for a PAC-12 semifinal?

COACH RUECK: Yes, this team just needed time. We didn't know -- Talia has obviously impacted our team. That's added a layer of talent and filled a void that we had. So Talia's addition advanced us beyond probably what we were capable of before she arrived. But this team coming together, defending like we are now, operating cohesively, executing like we are now, inside/out, shooters all over the floor, we just needed a chance to play.

So if you give this group their normal preseason, this was my expectation from the beginning of conference. We played what 16th or 17th game -- 17th game today. That means it's mid-January right now on a normal year.

So I did expect us to be as good maybe, like I said, Talia wasn't here, so I don't know. But I expected us to be competitive with everyone in the conference this year. Happy that we finally had the chance.

Q. Aleah has become so, so good at recognizing where the defender is when she comes off the pick and roll, hesitating and getting just a sliver of space either for a great pass or a lot of times a pull-up. That's different. That's a growth point for her compared to last year. Is that something that you told her in the offseason that she needed to work on and you taught her how to do or is that from watching a lot of film on her part?

COACH RUECK: I think it's out of necessity. Certainly our staff, Jonas has worked really hard with her for four years now. Aleah coming in to Oregon State, one of the things I loved about her game was the ability to shoot a 3 over the top of an on-ball, off the dribble. When you see that as a coach that's a "wow" skill that you don't see that often. At least not make it very often.

So she was making those as a freshman in high school. So when you have that skill, she obviously has the ability to finish at the rim. Those two things were always there. Her finishing is obviously not much better than it was. And now she's added the mid-range and she's added the middle.

And in this day and age, that's typically the last part to come. Who has got that mid-range? And so I think back, obviously everybody's familiar since we played Oregon today, with Sabrina, Sabrina didn't have that mid-range our first year playing against her and then every year she would add something, add something, add something to the point at the end you couldn't guard her. You just had to hope she missed or try to throw something at her to keep her off balance.

Now you're seeing that same progression in Aleah, where she can go left, she can go right, she can score in the middle, she can hit a runner, hit a pullup, she can make the right pass at the right time. Her awareness right now is just so much different. The game has slowed down. The hesitation and all those parts of her game, that's just a ton of hard work on her part and it's a really great basketball mind, you know, to go along with the skill.

It's a joy to watch. Joy to watch. When she got here I told her the sky's the limit. The sky's the limit. She could be as good as she wants with her skill set and her mind, her body. She's not the most elite athlete but, man, she's a better athlete than people think. She's a tough cover. She's a tough cover. I'm so proud of her.

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