

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Portland vs Kansas State

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Manhattan, Kansas, USA

Bramlage Coliseum

Kansas State Wildcats

Jeff Mittie

Serena Sundell

Ayoka Lee

Gabby Gregory

Media Conference



GABBY GREGORY: I've been saying all year that I think that -- here in Bramlage Coliseum, I think we have one of the best home court advantages in the country. So, I mean, I've been tweeting, I've been telling people, like, get your tickets. We're close to sellout, even just now, seeing that the tickets are just flying off. So it's just going to be a really, really awesome experience, more fans than we've played in front of all year and I just know it's just going to be awesome and I'm very, very, very excited. Hopefully, we can actually get the sellout before the game starts.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I'm just really excited. I think it will be a great atmosphere. It just adds to being able to host and being able to play in front of our fans. So, yeah, I think it will be exciting and I think we'll get sellout, so hopefully we do.

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I think our fans are what makes Bramlage Bramlage. We had the opportunity to go on campus yesterday and kind of just talk to students. We had a little mini hoop out there and we were just promoting our game. So this community has been amazing. I remember my freshman year playing at NC State in the first couple of rounds and that was just a really tough atmosphere, I mean, it's hard to hear, it just gives the opponent more pressure. So, yeah, we're going to have a huge advantage and we're super excited.

Q. Gabby, you talked about the excitement the fan base has about this. What was it like for you walking out with all the students camping out for tickets and just actually seeing how excited people are for this?

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, that was a really cool thing that we had so many students come in so early to pick up their free student tickets, and then, like Serena said, going on campus and just handing out fliers and different things, just to get the students excited. We talk to a lot of students. They were like, yeah, we already got our tickets, but thank you. And we're like, wow, you already did?

Yeah, it was a really cool thing. So many people were coming up and they wanted -- we were giving out mini Gap Goat, and they were like, I want a mini Gap Goat. So I'm excited. I think we're going to have a ton of students there

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

Q. How different does Bramlage feel now with all these different logos? Now you're sharing it with three other teams, it's still your home court, but how does it feel different now?

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, obviously it does, it feels a little different, just coming in as a group and walking in through the tunnel and different things like that. I'm just grateful that we're doing it here and not somewhere else. So at the end of the day, it does look a little weird, but I'm just very thankful that we are here at Bramlage.

SERENA SUNDELL: We got a chance to practice here yesterday and kind of saw the first look of all the banners and logos setup. It was pretty cool. It still feels like Bramlage to me. So we're excited to be here and have March Madness, yeah.

AYOKA LEE: Kind of what they said, it's really cool to see the banners and to be hosting, but, yeah, once we get on the court and get into practice and everything, it still feels like our home court.

Q. For any of you, talk about the expected atmosphere. I think we're close to a sellout. Almost all of 'em are going to be rooting for you guys. Talk about how that puts pressure on the opponent and how that will lift you guys.



and I really think the student section is what makes the games even more fun because the fans get into it, but not like the students do, so, yeah, I'm really excited to see the student turnout as well.

Q. Now that you've gotten to see Portland a little bit with the scouting and stuff, what's the biggest challenge with them?

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I think just defensively they are -- they have been really good in their league. Coach Mittie has been comparing them a lot to West Virginia. So they like to force turnovers, get you sped up, they will press, they will give you different looks on defense, zone, man, so we just have to be ready for all of that and not get too concerned with exactly what they're in.

But, yeah, I know defensively they're going to be a good matchup for us, so for me personally I just got to be ready to take care of the ball, stay composed, stay poised, and just stick to my preparation. Then offensively, I know they're good in transition. They like to push the ball and they're aggressive on the attack. So we'll be ready for all that, but, yeah, they're a good matchup and I'm excited to see them. I'm excited to play new teams too, to see different people outside of the Big-12. So, yeah, I'm excited.

Q. Curious how easy it is for you to be able to turn on that killer instinct once you guys get on the court. Even though there's signage everywhere and everyone is really excited, when you were in practice yesterday, how easy was it to kind of hit that switch and really get in business mode?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think one of the best parts about hosting is that it's just like another home game, so there's no adjusting we have to do to where we're playing. We know the crowd's going to be behind us. So I think all those things just make it easier for us to just get out there and take care of business or do what we need to do to get the job done. So, yeah, I think -- I don't think it was too hard. I don't think we're really caught up in all of the signage and it being March Madness and having to share Bramlage with the other teams. I think we're really just focused on our game and our assignment for tomorrow.

Q. The announcement came on Sunday. What's been the favorite thing that you've done between Sunday and Wednesday or between Sunday and now? What's been the favorite thing?

GABBY GREGORY: Singing karaoke as a team Sunday night. That would be my favorite thing that we did. That was a lot of fun. Just celebrating that we got to stay here,

went and sang some karaoke that night. That was my favorite thing that we did.

SERENA SUNDELL: I'll second that.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, that was a pretty good time.

GABBY GREGORY: Did you sing?

AYOKA LEE: I didn't sing.

GABBY GREGORY: She didn't sing. Me and Serena sang.

AYOKA LEE: I was supporting (laughing).

Q. Wondering about Portland's center. I know she's about your size, but what kind of matchup do you see there and what does she do well?

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think it will be a good matchup, but I think it also really comes down to just us playing our game and me playing my game well. The Big-12 is full of great centers, so I don't think it's anything that we haven't seen or I haven't seen this year or any other year I've played. So, yeah, it will be a good matchup, but just like any other game, it just comes down to us trusting our preparation and me just, yeah, being confident in mine.

Q. Dating back to the Big-12 tournament just a couple weeks ago, how was the fan support then and how can that translate to this weekend?

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, we had a great turnout at the Big-12 tournament. I would say those felt similar to home games. We had a great crowd for both our games there. Yeah, it's not going to be anything compared to what we're going to see tomorrow. I am hopeful of that. Yeah, I don't know.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think Bramlage is different from T-Mobile. I think T-Mobile is a lot bigger, like, things sound maybe a little more spread out, where here it gets loud. It gets really loud. Yeah, I think we had a great turnout and that's great to come off of, but -- and I think tomorrow, yeah, it will just be louder and different. It will probably feel like more energy just because of how much -- it's not that much smaller, but how much smaller Bramlage is.

Q. Back to the karaoke first. Who had the best performance and what was that performance?

GABBY GREGORY: I think Taryn and Ja'Mia did really well.

AYOKA LEE: What did they sing? Love something.

GABBY GREGORY: No they did "some people want it all."

SERENA SUNDELL: If I ain't got you by Alicia keys. Tough draw, tough pick, but they executed really well.

GABBY GREGORY: They did really well. Surprising pairing, and they did a really good job. Me personally I always think I'm the best karaoke singer. But, yeah, me and Jace Friesen, my Cat backer buddy, Mr. Wildcat NIL, we always sing Tyler Childers songs, so we sang a couple of those, killed it, per usual.

Q. From when you guys got recruited, and Gabby, you transferring, does it feel like this has been kind of building to this moment where you guys have a chance to go do something really special that this program has been kind of turning towards?

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, obviously coming out of the portal, I came to K-State for moments like this. This is what I transferred here for. Like I said, I wanted to play with Yoki. But this is what I envisioned when I said I wanted to come to K-State. I wanted to go to the NCAA tournament, I wanted to make a run, I wanted to finish my college career right, and I think that we have a great opportunity to do that.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think it's been really cool just to see how much the program has grown and just developed in my time here. I've had a lot of great teammates over the past few years, but it's really cool to see just like specific pieces come together that do build to moments like these. So, yeah, it's been awesome.

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I think every year since I've been here our team has just grown and we figured out how to play together better and our standard has just continued to get higher every year. I was recruited by a lot of Mid Major schools, so I'll never forget my dad telling me, like, K-State's going to be the one school that's going to be the best shot to go win a National Championship or make a run at it.

So, yeah, I think that's why we're all here right now and sitting up here is because we wanted to go make history in basketball and do that at K-State, so we're excited.

Q. Coming into this weekend as the highest seed, what does Coach tell you about staying levelheaded and not letting that get to you and just not -- like, avoiding upsets, you know.

GABBY GREGORY: Yeah, he always does this thing

where he gives us the bracket, but all the seeds are taken off. So basically we're all equal and seeding doesn't matter, just take it one game at a time. So right now we're just concerned with Portland. It doesn't matter what seed they are. It's just go out there and play basketball. So that's really how we view it.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Ladies, thank you.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: All right we'll get started with questions for Coach.

Q. A lot of attention on the atmosphere. Close to a sellout already. Maybe it will get there. Talk about the advantage to your team, and you've been in the other setting, talk about the disadvantage to the other team.

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I think we've played in a lot of big atmosphere all year long. That's been one of the things that we challenged our team with early, right? So we were at Iowa, we were in the Florida tournament, which turned into a great atmosphere as well for that championship game. Certainly in the Big-12, we face a lot of big crowds. We've had tremendous crowds here this year. That's one of the things that has been so much fun, to watch our team connect with the community and the community embrace and really support this team.

So I think our students have been fantastic. It's a tough atmosphere when our students get going, so the better we play, the louder our fans are, so we got to play good basketball. But certainly they have supported us and at times -- as I've said in here numerous times, at times they have lifted us and carried us forward because it is a big advantage.

Q. What does Portland challenge -- how does Portland challenge you for the game? They have got a big center in the middle and then a lot of tall guards.

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, well, you mentioned it right there. They have got good size at the guard spot. They have got a six-six player that really defends the rim well for them. Defensively they create some chaos. They create a lot of turnovers. I think they're averaging 11 steals a game. They lead their conference in that. They have just got a good overall basketball team and certainly coming off a very big win over Gonzaga in the championship. But not just that one, they got the Santa Clara one before that one. So they have got a good solid basketball team.

Q. I was wondering, after the Selection Show, you said, This is one of my favorite days. You're talking

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

about getting the coffee on and kind of getting things going. Walk me through that routine that night and just how much fun this has been for you.

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, I'm one, as a coach, that I get more sleep as the game gets closer. I think that when you talk about the Selection Show, it's a late night, right? There's a lot of preparation. So I don't know what time we shut it down. I'm not one that looks at the clock necessarily, just shut it down when you're too tired to watch anymore film, right?

But it's an early morning the next -- and it's an exciting time, right? The prep for us, as we walk through it, I think we probably left the office somewhere around midnight. I probably shut it down at home at 1:30 or 2, somewhere in there, got up early, because the prep for us is -- what I want from my staff is I want all their areas evaluated by the next day about 2:00, okay? The initial wave of stuff to me. So we break that down. I'm focused solely on Portland, okay? They have to branch out and look at the rest of the bracket, but I'm focused solely on Portland.

So that preparation is real heavy because that first practice for us was on Tuesday. So we want everything in, certainly the initial look. So I think it went well. Staff did a great job. They got me the information I needed. When they didn't, they answered my text real quick and got me more information. Collaboratively, we come up with a game plan and that's kind of how we did it.

Q. There was no karaoke for you Sunday night?

JEFF MITTIE: Karaoke for me Sunday night? No, no, no, no, no. The celebration -- you saw the celebration. It's about five minutes, right? I was really excited. I don't want to -- there's time to celebrate these things at the end of the year, but I was really excited for our fans, really excited for just K-State athletics and our team, just to be able to earn one of the top 16 seeds. But that's not the goal. That was one of the goals coming into the year, was to be in this position, and that was one of the goals, so I was excited about that.

Q. The signage all over the place, you have a very veteran team. Do you have to say much to them? I know they're excited, but they still -- I mean, it seems like they exude that killer mentality whenever they get on the court.

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I think this, I told 'em too, they could listen to the noise until midnight on Sunday night, then after that, they needed to adhere to our rule of blocking out the noise, both good and bad, because you're going to have every bit of it. You're going to have the good of everybody

saying all the great things about you, you're going to have people talking about who they predict to win in the bracket, I mean, all of the above.

We know that this -- you're talking about those things are at your fingertips 24/7, right? It's not just picking up a newspaper or listening to it on the radio. These things are coming to their devices 24/7. So I do have to say a lot to 'em. I do. It's constant reminders. It's not -- you can have as great a team as you want, but it's constant reminders.

The other thing that is such a horrible thing right now for all these student-athletes is that there's just other things at this time of the year that are swirling around, whether it be transfer portal stuff of other programs. All those things are detrimental to what should be the most exciting part of the year and the most exciting week. You have to constantly remind them, be where your feet are and do those things. So I don't think -- you can have the best team at it and you still have to remind 'em, and you can have a team that you worry about it. I've got a very good one, but I still have to remind 'em.

Q. Building off that, do you allow yourself to multitask at all with recruiting this time of year or is it completely focused on the NCAA tournament?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, I think you've got to be able to -- we're not in the business where we can just close things off. We can't close shop in any area. But that's not any different than recruiting is 365. However, that isn't my focus right now, and it's not my staff's focus right now, but, yes, we take phone calls, we do, but we politely tell people, Look, we'll have those discussions down the road, you know.

If a recruit isn't appreciative of the fact that our focus is on our team, then they're probably not the right recruit for me.

Q. Listening to Gabby up here, it seems like she's been around the program as long as anybody, but you got her as a transfer. Why do you think she's been able to fit in so well since she got here?

JEFF MITTIE: That's a great question. Gabby's personality is one that she's an all-in kid. She doesn't dip her toe into much, at least that I've seen in life. She's all in from the start. So it starts with that. I think she already had a good idea of what our program was about before she got here, so I think that gave her even better opportunity for her to come in and immediately fit in. I think the other thing -- I can remember a conversation I had with Gabby right away because I wanted her to be one of the leaders on the team. I said, Look, I need you to establish that right away. I need you to come in in the summer and be the

hardest worker in the weight room, I need you to lower your head, I need you to do the work, I need -- you have to show that to your teammates. She did it. She did it right away. It was very evident the first two, three weeks that she was establishing herself as a player that we were going to go to and a player that we were going to rely on.

Q. You're playing in Bramlage, you're at home, and yet there's signage up all around. The NCAA has a little bit more control over your practice times and things like that. Just how different does this feel for your team and how are you managing that with them?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, it's definitely different, but different is good. Different is good. Right now, I mean, we've played, I don't know, 30-plus games, right? 30-plus games on the year, and you play all those games so that it is different at the end of the year. It is exciting. It is different. We don't do a lot of press conferences before practices throughout the year. We don't have the attention on us. But you play all those games to get to different.

We've earned it. It's certainly -- the advantages of being at home, there are different distractions of being at home, ticket distractions, you have families coming in, you have all those different things that our players need to manage. But one of the things I've told our players is, embrace those things, because one of my favorite things of coaching has been these type of things bringing our family together. Not just my family with my own young adult children, but families of past players at Kansas State. Players that maybe haven't been back to campus in a long time. These are things that we should celebrate, and our players need to celebrate. They have probably got uncles and aunts that haven't gotten to see 'em play that are excited about that. So embrace that, enjoy it, because it goes fast, and you should enjoy that part of it.

Now, having said that, we'll keep it in perspective. We're going to enjoy it a lot more the better basketball we play, and there's the balance that you got to find.

Q. You mentioned Sunday that having a long stretch of just straight practice between the Big-12 tournament and the NCAA tournament would be really good, not only for Lee to just have consistent practice, but for the players around her and I'm curious how you have seen your team handle that and how they have developed in this time.

JEFF MITTIE: It's time to play (laughing). It's time to play. Coaches, we always like practice more than the players. I was joking around with, we have a fast break drill called Argentina. It's a conditioning drill disguised as a fast break drill (laughing). The players are like, Are we doing

Argentina today? I'm like -- you know, so they're ready to play. They're ready to play. They have had a good week of practice. It's been what I wanted. We need to have good preparation today, but it's been what I wanted. I think we've got good work done. I think the fact that the game is now here, the preparation for the game is now here, is better because it, that gap is, yeah, as we talked to the Big-12 tournament, when they moved the Big-12 tournament up you knew you were going to have that big gap. I had experience with that with other leagues, so I went back over my practices in other leagues. I think this team has handled the break well. I think it was a good break for us, but now it's time to play.

Q. The players when they were up here seemed pretty loose and seemed to really be embracing it like you talked about. Has that kind of been their personality all year or are you seeing just the excitement maybe of being the host in the tournament?

JEFF MITTIE: I think a little of both. It's a fun team to be around. I think they have been excited with just the energy that has been around campus, the energy that's been around the community. We've had 'em out a little bit early in the week on campus with students. We had 'em in line, I think it was Tuesday morning when the students opened up and there was roughly 300, 400 waiting in line for tickets. You got to appreciate those moments because it's not like that everywhere. I think our players have enjoyed that. I think -- but I think their personality is that then joy -- for the most part they enjoy practice, they enjoy the work. That's why, as I've said numerous times, it's been an enjoyable team to be around. It's that way on the road. People that travel with us, it really -- people use the word family loosely now, you know. I would say that the way our team travels is the way you see them every day. There's not much of a change. I like that about 'em.

Q. The game has not been sold out yet, but it's pretty close, and Gabby mentioned on Sunday how she was hoping for a sellout. What would it mean just to have a full packed stadium completely sold out for the team and your players?

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, what would it mean? I think it says a lot about our fan base. I think it says a lot about what our administration has done to host this tournament. It takes a lot of work to do that. It takes a lot of work from a lot of people. Fan experience, takes a lot of work for our table crews, extra work, it's one of the things though that, when you get into college athletics, the grind of the work, you do it for these special moments like this. You do it for the special moments for the student-athletes. Those that don't do it for that, they get out of college athletics, because you're working a lot of extra hours. But the extra hours are



the fun hours. The extra hours are the joy of maybe watching a booster that has been part of the program for X amount of time that has committed so much and cares so much about Kansas State. So all those things are so much fun to be a part of. So for it to be sold out, I would just simply say this: It would be awesome to sell it out, but the fact that we're sitting here close says a lot already about the excitement that our fan base has and the excitement that our community has for the tournament, and says a lot about the connection that our team has had with them.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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