

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Idaho vs Oklahoma

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Norman, Oklahoma, USA

Lloyd Noble Center

## Oklahoma Sooners Raegan Beers Payton Verhulst Sahara Williams Jennie Baranczyk

Media Conference

**Q. How cool is this to be in the tournament? You guys are old enough now, you've played in so many big games, I would guess, all over, but this is what you guys dream of all the time. I don't know who wants to start, but how cool is it that you're actually in this game?**

RAEGAN BEERS: I can start. Obviously March Madness is the time that you all work for all season. All the prep in the off season, in the summer time, all those extra workouts, this is what it has led to. To do it with this group is really special. We have a great group of freshmen and sophomores, the underclassmen here who have had just so much fun. You can see the life in them actually like ten minutes ago. They're so excited to be here and be part of March Madness. It's been a joy to be with them and go through it.

PAYTON VERHULST: Absolutely. Even more special to be able to do it at home in Norman too. We're excited to have the crowds. We got to experience it a little bit last year, especially in our Iowa game. So just knowing how much those crowds mean too and just being able to play at home is something special.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think they kind of said all the good things. I'm just continuing a legacy here at Oklahoma to something that's been paid before us. Like Raegan said, doing it with this group has been really special. So wanting to go as far as we can and playing as long as we can together, especially since this is our last year. So soaking it all in.



**Q. You guys are coming off a game that I know you don't think you played well in, but you've had a whole week to get ready. Can you talk about from your perspective the workouts and how you were able to -- were you able to flush that and get ready for the Vandals tomorrow night?**

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I'll start. You have to flush it at this point. Everybody is 0-0. You win to keep going. It's kind of like you just gotta keep going and playing. I think we've gotten better. Humility builds a lot of character. We've learned. This is a group that wants to get better and wants to be in those positions in the big moments. I think we've really worked hard. I think that's kind of the easiest way to put it.

PAYTON VERHULST: I think that something maybe you take for granted in past years. We don't have the extra week after our tournament before the NCAA. It's kind of daunting looking on that week without knowing who you're going to play or where you're going to play or what's going to happen. You're really just getting better as a team and having fun. I feel that was something we really did well this week, just growing together and having fun playing basketball.

RAEGAN BEERS: To build off of that, you don't have an opponent, so you have a week to focus on yourself, which can be daunting and stressful at times. But you learn a lot about your team and about each other and this time of year and what it takes to win.

Obviously we didn't win the way we wanted to in that ACC Tournament, but we're prepared and ready to go tomorrow.

**Q. You just mentioned having a fun week, but I think people forget you're student-athletes. Is it bizarre at all that you're getting ready for probably the biggest event of the year while everybody else is on spring break?**

RAEGAN BEERS: Definitely, campus is dead. When we go to the training room on campus and by the football stadium, it's definitely different just going there and no one is there, parking spots all over the place, which that we are



thankful for.

But my sister's on spring break, she's going home soon, all the things. You know that, but also basketball is fun. That's why we came here. That's why we do it. We knew that what we signed up for was a three-day break at Christmas, and that's about it, missing the rest of the major holidays, and we signed up for it. We love it. We love this team. It's easy to miss spring break and going home, when we have the team surrounding us.

PAYTON VERHULST: Especially as a student-athlete, you learn to appreciate those things too. Being a college athlete, you don't want to have spring break because that means you're done and not playing in the NCAA Tournament. For us we take it in stride. For us it's fun. We get to enjoy each other for a week and get to focus on that one tournament, one game at a time, and just have fun.

**Q. How nice is it to have new opponents to look at instead of SEC opponents? And do you find yourselves now all pulling for each other in conference whereas a month ago you wanted to kill each other?**

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think it's been -- it's fun obviously playing a new team, scout's different and all the things. I think like Raegan said earlier we really got to focus on who we are and what we do. I feel like especially in March that's really good to have your own identity, how you want to play and how you want to beat teams and how you want to win games.

Obviously when you watch other games and see other SEC opponents, you want them to do well. We're all in this together, but obviously we really want to do well. So I think that's the most important thing.

**Q. To kind of piggy-back off that, both of you guys said that you guys have gotten better. So two things, because we're going into March Madness, these are all conference teams from all over. They don't know what Oklahoma basketball is. How would you describe how you play your style? When you talk about getting better, what does that mean?**

RAEGAN BEERS: I think especially this past week we focused a lot on the defensive side of the ball. Offensively too of course because we needed to improve in that aspect. But we need to play better team defense. I think we all agree with that, I think the whole team agrees with that, along with our coaching staff.

We focused a lot on that this last week, helping each other, covering for each other, how we can do that with different

styles of teams, with teams who can shoot really well, teams who can drive. So they did a good job of simulating that in our practices and trying to get better in that respect.

In that area, we have grown, I think, with our talk, with our communication, in order to play better team defense going into a tournament where every team is good. They're here for a reason, whether they're from your conference or not. So it's going to be a challenge.

PAYTON VERHULST: I would say Oklahoma basketball is just fast-paced, it's fun. We like to score a lot. Obviously this week we got to work on defense a lot too. So working both ends of the ball.

I think for us we're at our best when we're having fun and we're out there and not thinking about making mistakes or things like that. I think that's something that we've seen in a lot of our good games this year. I think just taking that and knowing that's what we worked on this week and going forward one game at a time.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think just to go off of that, I know our big main focus is our rebounding, scoring, and assisting. So I think those are really three things that identify Oklahoma. Like Payton said, just getting back to having fun and everyone being a scoring threat, everyone rebounding, everyone passing, and just being well-balanced as a team, I think, has been a thing for us as well.

**Q. This is obviously a new team, a new scout, as you guys said. What's your impressions of Idaho?**

RAEGAN BEERS: Obviously they won their conference. I think the last 18 games they've won. They're a good team. We scouted them the past couple days, got some good shooters, of course, got an inside presence that I'm excited to go up against. So lots of pieces.

They have some seniors that lead them very, very well. So we're just excited to play a new team obviously. It's going to be a good challenge for us to see a different opponent that plays similar to us. Their pace is pretty fast compared to us and similar to us. So that's going to be exciting obviously to play a team like that where we can see a part of ourselves in them.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think especially around this time of year we're going to get everyone's best shot. They won their conference, 18 in a row, they're a really good team. They're legit. So just putting our best foot forward, and we've got to play our best basketball tomorrow to keep winning. So I think that's a big part too.

**Q. You often set the tone of the team, how you come out and play. They're shaking their heads. I know that's the case. When you come into the game tomorrow night, it's a late game and everything, talk about your mindset.**

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think, like you said, it's understanding the presence that I have to get these girls going. I've got to be ready. I've got to be ready to go. I've got to be steady. I can't be too high, too low. I just have to be a big presence, not only scoring, not only rebounding, not only assisting, it's being a leader out there. Especially because it's late.

We have some girls who have never played in March Madness. This is their first go round. So just being there for them and just being steady overall is my main focus.

**Q. It's a late game, as you mentioned. How does that change things for you guys? What will you do differently tomorrow to make sure you're ready at 9:00 p.m.?**

RAEGAN BEERS: A basketball game is a basketball game. I feel like, because it's March, we're going to be ready regardless of what time it's at because we're going to be so excited. I know our freshmen, I feel like, are going to be like that.

But 9:00 p.m. is late. It's a time when half of us are in our beds reading a book or something. We've been trying to prepare for that, starting later practices this week, trying to get in the groove of that, trying to get into a routine because that is important. It might be a little bit of a challenge, but honestly it's March Madness, and we're excited to be here, excited to play. Whether it's 9:00 a.m. or 9:00 p.m., we're going to be ready to go.

PAYTON VERHULST: I feel like I probably catch the most strays being the oldest on the team, being the grandma. If I can make it, we'll probably be pretty good. So we'll be good.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: We're just really excited to be able to host in Norman. It's really nice that it's gone from about 10 degrees to 100 in a week. So that's really nice for everybody to spend their spring break here. You get a little bit of everything.

No, we're just really excited to be able to get back on the floor. I think we worked a lot this week in our kind of, quote, unquote, off week, and we'll be ready to go

tomorrow night late.

**Q. Jennie, talk about the Vandals? It's cool you get to play a new team, I guess? Talk about that and what they bring to the table?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Idaho is a special team, and they've had a really great year, to be able to win their league. They're a fun team to watch. They're well-balanced and a great pace. So it's going to be a really fun basketball game for us.

They've got good interior players. They've got great guard play. They've been a fun team to be able to watch and scout. He's just done a great job there, and you can tell why they've won a lot of games.

**Q. Jennie, you touched on the off week. What was your focus on that week? What's your overall feelings on just the timing of everything now that you've gone through it a couple years with the SEC versus how it was in the Big 12 playing later?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Last year was our first year to really have that off week to work on some things. I think we learned a little bit what we liked a year ago, what we didn't like. Also, this was an interesting year because you can -- your team can go one of two ways after what happened at the tournament and playing LSU. We had some good moments, and then our wheels fell off.

So it was a good week for us to make some decisions. Are you going to focus on getting better, looking in the mirror and really focusing on working hard? Or you can fall apart. Those are kind of your two options.

For us I was really impressed with especially our young players. I thought they really got in the gym and worked. Our older players knew. They understand the experience. They understand every minute counts. Your younger players don't understand that.

Even though it's well into the season and they have a lot of experience, this is their first NCAA Tournament. It's their first time that it's really win or go home. So I was really impressed with how hard we pushed them last week and how much they were able to really get after it. They were very, very competitive, and it was a really good week to work.

That's what we focused on. We focused on ourselves. We don't focus on projected opponents. We don't focus on anything other than we've played some really, really good teams in the past couple of years -- in fact, if you look at the top ten, we've played every team. So you're able to

see what you look like against those teams and areas that you find success and areas that you have to get better, and that's really what we focused on.

**Q. Several of your players have talked about the chemistry on this year's team and how special that has felt. I'm curious from your perspective how have you seen this team that's really young grow through the course of the year, and how have you seen that chemistry develop as the season has gone on?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Chemistry can mean a lot of things, so can culture. Just because you're nice and you like each other doesn't mean you have good chemistry. And just because you don't, doesn't mean that you don't. For them to be able to develop -- the nice thing is they really like each other off the floor, and our freshmen have really fit in.

What's been really fun to see is that on court chemistry start to grow. We've had moments that we look really, really good, and we've had moments that we kind of forget about our chemistry and we try to fix things ourselves.

Especially when you have really young point guards in both Zya Vann and Aaliyah Chavez, and for them to be able to come in and grow, and you have a Raegan Beers in the paint that you have to have pass to her, you have to have the chemistry to be able to get production from her. So it's been fun to be able to watch us navigate. Fun might not always be the best word. Sometimes I can think of other words that aren't as positive.

But at the same time, I think that's what we've really tried to do. So we don't have to worry so much about them respecting each other, liking each other, I like that part. It's more of how do you really bring your game and play to the strengths of others? That's chemistry. That's this time of year. That's what comes out.

So when push comes to shove, we've had moments that were really good together, and we've had moments that we've fallen apart. So that's what we really tried to focus on this year.

I don't want to misconstrue that chemistry isn't here, but it's something that you've got to still work for. It's not magic. It doesn't just happen. You have to be able to bring your best, expect the best for and from, and also play to each other's strengths. That's something that we have not necessarily been really consistent on, but when we do, man, we're really, really good.

**Q. Jennie, you talked about it at different times throughout the year about how Aaliyah has grown and**

**matured. After a full regular season with her -- I mean, this time last year she was visiting at a tournament game -- what's it been like for you going into the tournament this year and where do you think she's at right now?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: She's been such a joy to coach. You talk about somebody that wants to be really good, that wants to do great things on both sides of the ball. She's willing to fall down. She's willing to learn.

You can see that she came in and she didn't even know how to trust a team. She was very ball dominant, and you can see that every game she continues to get better, every game she's trying to put other people into their strengths. She wants to learn. She wants to be great.

There have been times that she's missed game-winning shots. There's times that she's made game-winning shots. So for her to get that kind of experience as a freshman leading into the NCAA Tournament, I don't know if you get that much experience. Sometimes she's had to be able to be on the floor and get a stop. There's times that she's had to be able to get the ball to certain people.

So to be able to have that much can only continue to benefit her, but I love her everyday process. She comes with a smile on her face. She wants to work. She resets. She doesn't really hold onto things too long. She just cares a lot. So it's been really, really fun to coach, and I just -- the sky is the limit for her and her potential, but it's because of what she sees in the people around her.

I knew that coming in, but you don't know it until you're with somebody every day and you live with them for a year. So to know now what I do get to know, I'm really lucky to coach her. This program is really lucky to have her, and she's really lucky to have this program too.

**Q. Are you a fan of the 9:00 p.m. tip?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Clearly you know I'm going to say yes. Aren't you? What else were you going to do on Friday night?

**Q. Nothing.**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Honestly, you had no plans at 9:00, I'm guessing.

**Q. Zero plans. My wife is thrilled.**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I know she is.

**Q. Secondly, how important is the fans? This is your**

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**third time hosting since you've been here. Last year had great crowds. How pivotal is it for OU fans to come out tomorrow night and potentially Sunday?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, it's essential, and this is what we talk about. You guys, most of you have been here for the five years that I've been here, probably longer, right, James, some of us? Honestly, a lot of you guys have been able to grow with us, where you can tell there's always been this really cool energy in our building. There just weren't as many people. So we continue to grow that.

You've seen us have really good games. You've seen us beat people we weren't supposed to beat or been in games because our fans have been part of it. So we have been so lucky that the people that come are so invested and pour just incredible energy in here. We just needed more people as years have gone, and you've seen that, the NCAA Tournament from the first year to this year.

But now we're really going to test our fans, right? 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night, we need you. So we have to be able to show up with that same kind of energy, and I promise you we're going to do the same. We're going to do everything that we can for our fans, but we need them to do it with us.

That's how we've won games. That's what we really want to continue to do. We're still trying to build this elite fan base here in terms of numbers, in terms of having a home court advantage.

I know we've talked about having the new arena, and I know we've talked about all those things, but it can get rocking here, and we have felt that this season. So we need to make sure on Friday night that it is too.

**Q. This is going to sound like a negative question. The last game you guys didn't play very well. So you go into this practice and you know you're going to be in the tournament, and whether it hurt you in the seeding or whatever it did, but this is what you're faced with. And you can erase any bad things that happen by playing well in this tournament. How did you approach the week? I'm asking because I love to find out what you guys do. How did you approach the week coming off that game knowing everything you've got is in front of you?**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Hungry, very hungry. I think one of the things we do really well is we're very, very blue collar. We're very able to roll up our sleeves, put our boots on, and go to work. I think we're able to look at the mirror, and we didn't blame anybody else. We just said, okay, we failed. We're not failures, we failed again.

We've had some taste of that, right? The SEC Conference is no joke. Two years ago you added us and Texas, and it makes it even stronger right now. You look at the teams, you go through that selection show, and it's like SEC, SEC, SEC. We've played them. We've played them. We've played them. We've fallen short. We might have won that game. There is so much talent in that league.

So it humbles you, but it keeps you hungry, and it keeps you motivated, and it keeps you wanting to get better. It keeps poking holes in the things that you're doing, and it keeps shining lights on the things you're doing well.

That's how we approach the week. We looked at all those games over the last couple years as a staff, and we said, okay, we're really close here. We're really far here. What do we need to hone in on? You don't always want to just work on the things that you're not good at. Sometimes you've got to get really good at the things that you're good at and become great.

So that's really where we focused. What are areas that we need to do to continue to shine lights on us, and what are areas we have to get better at in order for us to continue to grow and move on? When you're in the SEC, you're not competing against good teams. You're competing against elite teams that year in and year out compete for National Championships. So you're going to get humbled, and you're going to fall down, but it's how you respond to it.

That's really how we tried to focus this week. We were hungry. We were humble. We didn't come in with a defeated, oh, woe is us. We came in very motivated. We know Idaho is nipping at our heels. We didn't know who we're going to play. We knew we needed to nip at our own heels that week.

That's really good when you don't -- we didn't go to projections. I didn't care what seed we went. I didn't care where we played. Of course I wanted to play at home, everybody does. But you've got to look in the mirror and you've got to get better. That's where our focus was.

**Q. You talk about the dynamic between the young players and the experienced players who have been through it. I wanted to ask you about one of your more experiences players, Payton, and just the way she's handled not only this last week, but this last part of the season, and what you see from her, what you expect from her in this last tournament run.**

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Payton's had a great week. There was something different that really shifted in her this week, and you could see it. Sometimes that's the end is near.

Sometimes it's just what's right in front of you.

Payton's had a lot of adjustments over a few years, right? She comes in, I mean, her first semester, she didn't get to play in a game, so she had to sit and watch. She watched us win a Big 12 Championship. The next year we kind of fell down in the nonconference. We clawed our way back. We didn't have post play. Liz Scott wasn't in. We had to makeshift a lot of things and won the Big 12.

Then all of a sudden we bring in Raegan Beers, and now we don't have a five out offense anymore. We got to be able to pound that thing inside. That's hard to adjust.

Then you bring in, obviously with Aaliyah coming in and she's a little bit more ball dominant, and trying to help her learn. But also Zya Vann improving the way that way Zya Vann improved this year, and she just does great things in the open court.

So Payton's had to learn a lot. Sometimes it feels like you don't have the production or you're not the player or you go through these different emotions, but the reality is look at the difference that she's had and she still finds ways. She's very, very versatile. She's a huge key for us. I want her having fun. I want her to play really hard. I want her to enjoy this experience. I want her to know how good she is.

I love watching young people figure it out, and even if it's on the last day that she figures it out, great. I don't think -- I think every single thing that she has learned is exactly what she's supposed to learn in the path she's supposed to learn it, even when it doesn't always feel good.

I love coaching her. I love watching her navigate this, and I love what she can do for us. We need her now more than we've ever needed her. So she's going to get to step up, and she's going to play really well in this tournament, I just know it.

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