

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Final - Oregon State vs South Carolina

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Times Union Center

Oregon State Beavers

Scott Rueck

Donovyn Hunter

Talia von Oelhoffen

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

Q. I'm guessing you've watched some of South Carolina's tape if not live yesterday, also. What's your impressions of them, and what do you need to do to keep on dancing?

SCOTT RUECK: Take care of the ball.

They're excellent. It's not the first time we've seen them, of course. We've scouted them throughout the week, should we have won, so we'd be prepared.

As you look at them, they're undefeated for a reason. There's not a lot of weakness out there. Very well-coached, experienced coach, and they've got a little bit of everything.

You've got inside presence like that, and then you've got a perimeter presence. You've got a defensive presence. Then everything you do kind of makes sense. Going to your strengths all game long. They're an excellent team.

For us, we've got to do what we do, and we've got to do it at an extremely high level. You get here, rebounding is a big deal, and being so tight defensively and making them miss and slowing them down.

Just like yesterday, we looked at -- turnovers were the talk after the game. I think equally as important were making shots and making them miss and rebounding. Turnovers in the first half yesterday led to transition.

Second half the mistakes didn't. They were dead ball, that



type of thing.

So making this a 5-on-5 game for us on the defensive end of the floor is going to be very important.

Q. Talia said at the beginning of the March Madness tournament that she wanted the team to treat every team that you guys faced like South Carolina. You guys obviously face them tomorrow. Knowing how good that they are and the level of competition you guys have faced this season, do you believe this may be the toughest challenge your team has faced so far this year?

SCOTT RUECK: It would make sense that it is. Our conference was a beast this year. This team, it's so hard to compare, but I would say, yeah, this is the No. 1 ranked team in the country. This is an undefeated team that's survived every battle, every test so far. We're looking to be the first team to beat them.

I would say yeah, they're long, they're athletic, take care of the ball really well and shoot it really well. I think that's the thing that probably is the separator for them is their ability to knock threes down.

We played them in the tournament -- South Carolina seems to always be in our region. This is the third time, I think, we will have faced them in the tournament.

The previous two times I remember going into those games -- we played them one other time. The previous three times, I guess I should say then, I remember looking at the defensive game plan and going, okay, we can help in off that. We can help in off that. We can provide help in the post off that.

This team, where do you help? I think that's what is separating this team in my opinion.

Q. You've obviously been in this position before, not just in the Elite 8 but even in the tournament, facing an undefeated team the way you did back in 2016. How is this challenge different, and how do you get the opportunity to kind of learn from that game as you go



into this one tomorrow?

SCOTT RUECK: So you're referring to UConn, yep, in 2016. That was a pro team. The entire roster was a first-round draft pick and Breanna Stewart's fourth National Championship.

Looking back on that - it's interesting - looking back on that, probably remaining more of who we are in it. That team stretched you in so many ways. They scored so easily from everywhere. This team is similar.

You have to commit everything you've got to protecting the rim. There's no question, that is where the game is won. But not compromising maybe as much in the approach.

On the other end of the floor, you've got to knock shots down, bottom line, and Indiana showed that yesterday in hitting 13 threes, 12 or 13 threes.

So the offensive game you've got to be tight, you've got to hit everything on time, and you've got to be ready to make shots from the jump.

So I think those two things. Just making sure we're aggressive offensively and probably being just more of who we are on the defensive end of the floor.

Q. The second part of it is in so many ways this has been a program you have built. You have sort of imagined in a way that I think a lot of people didn't necessarily think Oregon State could become. I wonder, as you're heading into obviously a huge transition, how important was it to have this run happen now and with such a young team as you're trying to conceive of where this program goes next?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah. That's a good question. The outside circumstances have not impacted my mindset or my expectation of what we should and can and will do. They alter maybe the strategy within it, but they don't change what we're here to accomplish.

I get to coach at my school. It's a dreamy situation for me, and it always has been. I like doing things that people don't think are possible. Nobody thought Oregon State could win.

At my old school, nobody thought George Fox could win. So I've been living this for 28 years now, and it's a lot of fun. I intend to continue to have fun in that and compete at the highest level and make people ask me questions like you just did: How is that possible, and what are you going to continue to do, and how are you going to do it?

We love our players, bottom line. We coach them. We make pros, and we find ways to win games some people don't think we could. That's the joy of this, because ultimately all you're doing is helping your student see themselves different, and that's a transformational experience for them. That's where the joy in all of this is for me.

Q. As a follow-up to that, considering what the transfer portal is and where you're going to be playing next season, do you have fears, concerns that there will be folks who try to come after your players because you do have such a young team and say, well, you're not in a Power Five conference anymore, why are you still there, come play for my Power Five conference. I wonder if that's gone through your mind.

SCOTT RUECK: Well, that would be logical. That is the logic. That's reality.

Within it, to counter that, what strategies do we use to counter that? I think that's on an individual basis. Yeah, that's a thing for sure.

Within that, I can't control that, other than just keep doing what I'm doing. As far as worrying, as far as all those things that I could spend my time doing, I think I just -- it just lays the blueprint for how you operate.

But within this entire transfer world, I was scared of it at the beginning. We had very few transfers until COVID happened, and when COVID happened and our worlds all changed -- and especially on the West Coast the world changed at an extreme level. We ended up having transfers, and all of a sudden it was like a different experience for me, for everyone. I was scared of it at the beginning.

I can't say that I still am there. I think the opportunity within that for a leader provides a discipline that you'd better be on your A game all the time. You'd better take care of people, and you'd better provide a great experience. Otherwise, you are susceptible to the things that you just mentioned.

Certainly there's certain things out of our control. COVID was out of our control, and it caused a lot of disruption. Within that, I just made sure we were doing our very best within it.

I think that's the approach going forward, and what happens happens, and then we'll find a way. Nobody expected us to be here after the transfers that happened a couple years ago. God provides. It's just staying faithful and true and being yourself within it and being the best version of yourself within it.

Q. You've been in this phase before, the short turnaround, the second weekend. You've gotten through it. How challenging is it to go from the Sweet 16 to the Elite 8, the chance to get to a Final Four that's just dangling right there? How does this feel? How do you prepare? How challenging is this moment?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, I love it. That's what I'd say. This is what we all do this for.

This is a little earlier today than I would have chosen, and so this added to the challenge a little bit, just the timing of things and playing at 1:00 tomorrow is a little earlier than I would have chosen for preparation and all those things.

However, that's what we do. So find a way. This is living the dream. This is what we all do this for. So pushing the right buttons at the right time and making sure every syllable is the right syllable or the best you can do, making sure the team is in the right place, seeing the right things, all those things, that's the joy in this entire process.

I would say it's extremely challenging, but of course it is. It's beautiful.

Q. How did you develop your philosophy of, on defense, position over, say, pressuring the ball, going after steals, and what's the process like of the buy-in beyond playing time? How do you get players to buy into this?

SCOTT RUECK: I would say defensive philosophy, as you're building the system -- I like winning, and I like to win the biggest games, and I've cut some nets. I like cutting nets, hanging banners, and I like lots of smiles on lots of faces because of it. That means you have to beat the best teams.

The best teams typically don't turn it over much. The best teams are going to get the ball to their scorers. The best teams are going to defend you very well, all those things.

So when you build a system -- if you've noticed over the years UConn hasn't pressed much. That doesn't mean they don't get steals. Stanford hasn't pressed much. You wouldn't call them pressure teams. But man, you feel pressure when you play against them.

And I would say I think Notre Dame felt pressure yesterday. Down the stretch they were going to the wrong hand, they were doing different things, they had to shoot and make shots over the top of us all day, and they shot a poor percentage because of it. We had rebounding position because of it.

So why has Oregon State beaten Baylor over the years? Why have we have the wins we've had over the years to get to these spots? I would say it's that philosophy that has given us a chance when we typically have not been the most athletic team on the floor.

It's just evolved over time in that desire to beat the very best and what it would take. While we might not beat an average team by as many points as others, we'll still win that game, but we'll have a chance in this game. That's why I've chosen that.

As far as the buy-in, I think it's communication. I think it's trust. I think it's an understanding of what we're trying to accomplish and a realistic approach to where each person is and honest conversations within that. That builds the trust necessary to handle maybe the toughest situation, like why didn't I play tonight? I've got to trust the coaches that they made the best decisions for our team.

I hope that we're always on the same page with that as best we can be. I know that's every coach's challenge.

Q. About Donovyn, really gifted freshman, but this is a big high-pressure moment. How do you prepare a young guard like that to play in such a high-stakes environment?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, that's the fun of this season in many ways is bringing this team that's reliant on young players along. I have a lot of experience in my past with first-year players playing in big games and big moments and expecting them to operate like a junior or a senior. I think, why not? You've been playing this game a long time, certain exterior environments will change, but it's still a game on the floor that you've been playing forever.

This is the year of your life, why wait until your sophomore or junior or senior year to perform? We can get you there.

I think a lot of it's trust and a lot of it is our staff doing a great job in the trenches day after day, minute by minute, bringing them along. It's the teammates and the upperclassmen accepting them and building their confidence and telling them they can do it and showing them the way. And then for me it's doing everything I can to steer them to success and out of mistakes and out of failure, which I think coaches can do is to help them minimize mistakes.

It's one of the things I've really -- I really enjoy that, that part of it. It's like, yeah, you're a freshman, but you're only a freshman for a little while. You're no longer a freshman. Play confident, play poised, and be you.

Q. Talia, when you see South Carolina on film and in person, what's impressed you about them and what you guys need to do tomorrow to come away with another victory?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think just how fast and how hard they play on both ends of the floor. I think slowing them down in transition is definitely going to be a key, and then obviously they have a huge inside presence, and she's the real deal.

We've been working against posts like that all year and have prided ourselves on being able to defend one-on-one in there. That's what it's going to come down to. Then obviously their defensive pressure is outstanding, and it's who Dawn Staley is as a coach, and all of her teams play that way.

Obviously turnovers were a problem for us yesterday, so we're going to have to take care of the ball and handle the pressure, but I think if we do that, we can get the shots we want, so it's going to come down to hitting shots.

Q. Scott seems to be a very level person, like not too high, not too low. I'm curious how that impacts the team, and what was he like as a recruiter, and what was it about him or Oregon State -- I know you're Pacific Northwesterners -- that made you want to play for him?

DONOVYN HUNTER: Yeah, he is very level headed, and I think when it comes to games, especially this deep into the season, postseason, it takes a lot of making sure that you keep your team calm because at the end of the day you can't really control foul calls or any of that. To have a coach that looks at you guys and calms us down helps a lot.

Then in the recruiting process he made sure he was really focused in on us outside of basketball, and I think that's a huge part because sports, people only think of athletes as us on the court rather than us as individuals a lot of the time, so he really focused in on that, and I think that helps us build a piece of trust with him when it comes to being on the court.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I don't want to use the word calculated, but I think there's a reason for everything he does. And especially yesterday with all the turnovers, I think it would have been really easy for him to be on us or get upset about that and react however.

But I think he knew that just we're a young group, and in that game that's not what we needed from him. So he was

very level headed and just took the approach of encouraging and problem solving, and I think that kept us calm in other areas of the game.

Our defense, our rebounding was incredible, and it's easy to talk about the turnovers after the game, but to be able to turn the ball over like that and still win means you're doing everything else really well.

So I think how level headed he was kind of kept us all calm and able to lock in on other aspects of the game, and so I think he knew that, and I think that's something that he really thinks about in those moments. That's just someone that's been doing this a long time. He's extremely intelligent, so yeah, it's everything for us.

Q. Scott has talked about the young team and the joy in watching you guys come together. I wonder if there were specific moments or specific off-the-court moments over the course of the season or last off-season where you guys felt that, specific instances where you could see that the team was gelling?

DONOVYN HUNTER: As a freshman myself, feeling the new experiences and everything being a first throughout this whole entire season -- there's of course moments. The turnovers that we've had, obviously not great, but that just does come from -- I'm speaking on my own turnovers. First time, first experience, you're learning things, and in order to grow you've got to make those mistakes.

I think there's obviously really good moments and then moments where it's like, of course we're young and we're learning, but throughout the season, especially with the Pac-12 Conference, we've been able to grow with each game we've had.

Even though it's showing now, I would say postseason it's less about us being young and now it's just we're also a team that can compete with anyone.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I was just going to say I think going off the court, talking about going to Italy and how -- we talk about it a lot in press conferences and in answers, but it really was so important for this team to gel and be around each other so much.

Obviously we were playing basketball over there, but you're off the court most of the time, going to dinners, things like that. That's when we all got really close. That was in August, and then you go into football season and we're going to all the football games together, we're tailgating, and we're all just super close.

That's all fall, all preseason and that carries us through to

where we are now and this group is just so tight knit. And I think our chemistry off the court is evident on the court, and we play that way. It's been so critical in our success this year.

Q. Donovyn, Scott talked about the fact that he doesn't see freshmen as freshmen, especially at this point in the year. I'm wondering to what extent it felt like you were not a freshman out on the court yesterday. Talia, for you, this is such a young team. You as a veteran presence, I'm wondering the way in which you use leadership. Are you a talker? Are you looking to lead by example? If you could tell me about the ways in which you do so.

DONOVYN HUNTER: Yeah, at this point, he's right. Whether you're a freshman, at this point that's not an excuse. Even if I make a mistake, oh, I'm just a freshman, it's my first time. We're so deep into the season that any mistake I make, that's just self-inflicted.

But there's so many moments, especially with her leadership by my side. She played point guard last year, so she knows the ins and outs of that. Not necessarily the pressure, but the duties that require the point guard position. Having her guide me helps me grow so much more to the point where now it's no longer I'm a freshman.

I would say a lot of the moments within the game really just the support that the team gives me to where being a freshman is no longer an excuse, and being able to execute the plays for my team I would say signifies that I'm no longer a freshman, that I'm a point guard.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think my leadership style, I think just communicating on both ends. I know everyone does that. But in the huddles, what I'm saying and obviously with the young group, there's situations I've been in or I've experienced or mistakes that I've made that I can kind of help them get ahead of or see what they're doing. I know our defense and our offense 1 through 5. I can run every play at every position.

Even just some of our young players, like Dom specifically she's played 1 through 4 for us this year, so it's hard to know all the plays and sets that we have from so many positions. So even just helping with play calls, and when Donovyn is getting pressure, to make sure everyone knows what we're in.

And our rotations, if someone misses a rotation, I'm very vocal about just getting everyone on the same page and making sure that we're holding each other accountable, and that's what I love about this team.

I'm definitely one that's holding everyone accountable, but I make sure that they know, if I make a mistake or if I'm not doing something, I want to hear it from them, too, so we have that kind of back-and-forth. And I think that's also played a huge role, and now we all hold each other accountable.

I don't remember what it was, but Donovyn got on me for something during the game, and I was like, shoot, a freshman should not be telling me that. I'm making this mistake right now.

That's the beauty of this team, you can have that, and like you said, she's not a freshman, and she sees things so much quicker now.

There's kind of a balance to start the year. You have to understand that she is a freshman and she's learning. I could have been in her ear a lot more than I was because I see the mistakes that could happen because I made them myself, and so I have a lot to say. But there's a balance because some of it you just have to go through, and that's how you learn.

But I think, yeah, I've just been in this program specifically a long time, so I know the system from every position. Just making sure I'm saying the right things at the right time. And I think late-game situations is where I've really grown in making sure we know the foul count, we know how many time-outs we have, all those little things I pride myself on.

I would definitely say kind of coach on the floor is my style of leadership.

Q. I asked your coach this question, too. With such a young team and knowing what the future holds for you guys and playing in your new conference, I'm wondering if you've thought about or have fears and concerns about trying to keep this team together knowing what the portal is and there may be teams that try and come after players and say you're not in a Power Five conference anymore, come play for us?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think we haven't talked about that or thought about it this year. I know I haven't. We had a great opportunity in the Pac-12 this year, and that's been what the conversation has been. That's what I've told the team during the season is we're playing for a Pac-12 Championship.

So all the other talk about conference realignment, all of that, it's going to be a conversation after the season for sure, and the future is uncertain in that regard. But we can only control what we can control, and our focus is on this season and this year.

I'm sure there will be questions after the season, and it's definitely going to be something that needs to be addressed and talked about just because we don't know what next year is going to look like.

But this group has been so good about just staying present and taking games one possession at a time, one game at a time, and when you're doing that, then conference realignment, the portal, all of that, it's not a factor.

I think even though we are young, we've been very mature in our approach to handling that, all of us have. I think that's been really impressive and important because there is so much noise and media, all of that, surrounding it. But it hasn't been a factor, and we've controlled what we can control, and it's got us really far.

DONOVYN HUNTER: To piggyback off that, to get this deep in the season, you have to truly be focused in on the now and the present. Our team hasn't thought about any of that stuff because we've got lots of things to focus on. Practice soon today, later today, so we're really just focused on the present.

Q. Talia, you tweeted where do we submit our application to be America's team? So make the case. Let's hear it.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: We just made a TikTok about this, so stay tuned for our real application.

But no, I just think there's so many big names in women's basketball, names that you see repeatedly in the media, and they're great players and they should be talked about.

But I think -- I don't know what the numbers are for media coverage, but we haven't been talked about a lot. We've been on the Pac-12 Network all year. A lot of people haven't had the opportunity to watch our team. So to be on this stage now -- I had people texting me that Notre Dame was talked about all game. So little things like that drive us.

But it's just this team plays so together, and we're so unselfish, and we love each other so much. That might not get views, that might not get clicks, that might not be a headline that pulls everyone in, but it wins games, and it's important between the lines.

I don't know, I just think this team is so incredible and so special, and so we might not have the big names in the commercials and TikTok stars yet. We're trying.

But no, I think that's all that means is just we're America's

team, we're selfless, we play together, we're a family, and that's a story, that's a headline that I can get behind and I think a lot of people should, too.

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