

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Bloomington, Indiana, USA

Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall

Oklahoma Sooners Jennie Baranczyk Sahara Williams Payton Verhulst

Media Conference

Oklahoma - 73, Florida Gulf Coast - 70

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, this was definitely a March Madness type of a game and we knew this was going to be quite a challenge, and I tell you what, they're such a good program. They're as good as advertised. We knew it. Pretty lucky to be on this side of this one.

THE MODERATOR: We will now take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Could you talk us through the defense of that final possession or series of possessions that they had.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: We knew what they wanted to get offensively in those last few possessions, so we were like no threes, no fouls, play clean D. We knew what we had to do and I think we just really gutted it out, stayed disciplined, executed, and we stayed together and played our game.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, going off that, obviously, in that last possession, we knew that they needed a three to put it into overtime and there was just enough time on the clock to get one shot off. We knew there was not going to be passes. So obviously they got a pretty good look at three, but at the end of the day, it didn't go in, so we're happy and we're going to learn from that.

Q. It's very much very much a March Madness game.



What were the emotions going through, especially in the fourth quarter there at the end.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, I think we just kind of had to settle down a little bit once we came in. Once we walked in and started warming up, we still had the Indiana crowd from the last game, so I think it was kind of amped up. It was just really settling in. They started off hot and then I think we finally gathered ourselves and got our feet underneath us and after that, I think it was just staying confident and staying present in what we were doing and what we had worked on this whole week.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think really in that fourth quarter we stayed steady. I feel like in these kind of games, it's kind of easy to go too high or too low and I thought we stayed here (Indicating), and that's really good for us to be able to gut that out at the end.

Q. You guys combined basically only missing two free throws between the two of you. So talk about how important that is in a game like this and how much is it emphasized coming into this game?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: Coming into this game, we worked on it all practice all week. Every day we work on free throws knowing that -- not a weaknesses, but something we really needed to get better at coming into March. I think all of us, all 14 of us, has really honed in on that and we really executed and we shot free throws. We were confident, we got to the line, which is something Jennie has been talking about in practice.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, I think it really just is a shout out to Sahara's game too, and what she adds to us is that she can get to the free-throw line because she attacks the basket and people can't really help but foul her or let her score. So that's something that's really important and valuable to our team this year.

Q. You mentioned before that you saw the lingering Indiana crowd before. What's the mindset heading into playing Indiana in front of this filled assembly hall?

PAYTON VERHULST: I think even playing in the Big-12



has kind of set us up for games like this, obviously teams like Texas and Iowa State who have great home crowds. But at the end of the day, I think we would rather play in front of a crowd than no crowd, so even if they're not cheering for us, I'm happy to be playing in front of a crowd.

Q. You guys get down 14 in the first quarter. What was the message, what was the energy like as you tried to find things out offensively and what was the key to turning things around and getting some of those shots to go down?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: We've been down before, so I don't think we really got rattled by that.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Way too comfortable is what she meant.

SAHARA WILLIAMS: Yeah, I don't think we got down on ourselves. I think it really set a fire under us. It's March. Nobody wants to go home. So I think we just -- we stayed together, we played our game, and we did what we had to do.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, if you look at the score, Florida Gulf Coast led for 32 minutes of the game. I feel like we talk a lot as a team, just you want to go to go on the last run towards the end of the game, and I feel that's what we did and we really closed out the game obviously. We want to start a little bit better going forward, but I think finishing the games is really important in March.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. They mentioned being comfortable playing from behind. What does that look like for you as a coach? What do they look like, what's the energy look like on the sideline?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Not as comfortable. No, I mean, honestly, I feel like -- it's easy to say now, but we did, we needed to steady up. We were running around with our heads cut off a little bit and that's kind of what they do. So it took us a -- I mean, you can practice as much as you want and try to prepare as much as you want for an offense like that, that everybody can shoot, everybody's driving really hard, but they don't always believe you in a practice, right? Where it's, nope, they're going to shoot that. I promise they're going to shoot that. No, they're going to shoot that.

So that is something that I think it took us a whole quarter to really adjust to. I thought the second quarter we settled in a little bit more defensively and just steadied up a little

bit. I feel like, again, we were running out, we were doing all these things, where we were playing hard, but we weren't necessarily just steady and able to read. And they're that good. They're going to knock those down when you're running around or you pick the wrong person or, you know, you don't get their shooters in transition.

So I felt like in the second quarter, we did a much better job. I think in the first quarter too, we passed it to them a lot. Their defense got us. So I don't even think it was just the offense that got us. I think the defensive part got us. So we had to settle in really on both ends. But they rattled us, no question, in that first quarter.

Q. Payton and Sahara touched on it a little bit, but the Indiana crowd today was really electric all game long. What do you expect out of them on Monday and how do you prepare for an environment like that?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I mean, we barely were able to prepare for Florida Gulf Coast. We got to enjoy this one. But I don't know. I mean, I think it's exactly what Peyton said, you got to love it for the sport and you got to expect it. It's the NCAA tournament. This place, I'm guessing, is going to be sold out, and if it's not, then I hope people that aren't Indiana fans fill the rest of the seats that are open and come cheer for us, right?

So, honestly, I think that we're just going to have to be ready to go. This is part of the tournament, is you've got to be able to go and you've got to be able to compete your best. Anything can happen at any moment, but when you're on the road and it's a road game in the tournament with an environment like this, we got to be ready. So we'll find out.

Q. They list every single player on their roster as a shooter, but you did force them to take more twos today than threes, which is unusual for them. Their threes came in spurts. Even though they had some runs and they made you nervous, how pleased were you with the defensive effort overall 40 minutes? Because you did take them at times out of their game too.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Again, I think the second quarter was a little bit happier with us in terms of our help. I think they got us a couple, though, where we weren't in help in that second half, especially, on some of the rolls from their ball screen actions. But I do feel like, for the most part, I felt like we settled in and we adjusted much better after that first quarter. The first quarter, I don't think -- and again, sometimes you can get as mad as you want as a coach, but you also -- the best experience -- the best teacher that we have is the experience, right? It's actually

getting out there and you have a feel for the game, and so that's something that we really want to be able to do.

I would like us to feel some things a little bit earlier. But I felt like more so than not offensively we weren't great. We had some moments where you could see our pace, you could see our movement, but I feel like our cutting and our offensive flow wasn't great. So you got to credit them for that and we've got to get better before Monday.

Q. In terms of your history with Coach Moren, you guys run into each other at Drake. What's your history, how well do you know her from your time in that same conference?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know what? I love Teri. I think she is so great, I think what she's been able to do, I think she's classy, I think she has integrity, I think she's a good person, she has humility. Her teams are always really tough, which is obviously an indicator of who she is. She's a great teacher of the game. You don't want to play against her because you like her. She's easy to cheer for.

But, yeah, so we have obviously history in the Valley and there's some -- that's also my background, that's also, talking about Florida Gulf Coast, I know how good they are. I understand that. I understand getting a seed that sometimes you feel like maybe you could get a little higher one, right? And that goes back to those days that we were in the Valley together, and then I watched her really build this program and it's pretty spectacular. So I have a lot of respect for her.

Q. I wanted to ask you about two big plays in the fourth quarter, or two big players, basically. Aubrey only had five points, but all five came at critical, critical moments, and then can you talk me through Payton's last basket that gave you the 72-70 lead?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Yeah, I thought Aubrey gave us some great energy, especially after you miss one, to be able to take that second one, I think is always huge. And then I felt like probably her biggest play was the offensive rebound. So Aubrey continues to -- she's had such an interesting year, where she's really been great for us, and then she's kind of been a little bit where maybe she hasn't had as much time on the floor. But you can really start to see what she's doing is coming back. Whether or not the ball goes in the hole, that's irrelevant. I know I shouldn't say that as a coach. But you can just see her bounce and she just provides such a spark for us. So that was really exciting, I feel like, for her.

Payton, you got to see Payton today, I think, almost too much like a point guard, where she was really trying to set

some things up for everybody, and then I think at the end of the game, she took exactly what she needed to when she needed to do that.

Q. We haven't asked you about Skylar yet and Skylar's game today.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know, Sky, again, I thought that was one of Skylar's better defensive games, and to really have to come out, because she hasn't done that. She's really had to battle on the interior. So for her to be able to make that adjustment, I thought was good. I didn't say great, but I did say good. Sky is also one that -- she's a unique player because she can score at different levels, she's a little unassuming, but I also feel like some of her rebounds were pretty big today too.

So I know her line is obviously okay as I'm looking at it, not necessarily her rebounding, but I also know that, gosh, there's such high expectations for Skylar and sometimes it's probably not fair and I'm really hard on her as a coach. But she just has it. She just has that it factor that she can kind of forget something and then just go right to the next thing. So I don't necessarily know if today was her best day, but I know she's a real special player.

Q. You guys, Oklahoma and IU both played down in Fort Myers in November. Of course you didn't get to play each other. Did you watch any of IU's games, kind of knowing that maybe there was a chance you would see 'em down the road?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: No. In fact, I don't even know if we actually showed up in Fort Myers when we played. But, no, I didn't. You don't even really start to think about all of that, or at least I don't. I'm pretty focused on what's in the here and now. But I know that they're really good. I know that they have had obviously great tradition and you know a lot of their players, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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