

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Nebraska vs Oregon State

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Corvallis, Oregon, USA

Gill Coliseum

Oregon State Beavers Coach Scott Rueck Talia von Oelhoffen Timea Gardiner

Media Conference

Oregon State - 61, Nebraska - 51

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

SCOTT RUECK: First off, I'm just really thankful, grateful, excited that I get to continue to coach this group. Even if it's for one more game or whatever, just one more day, I've just had the time of my life with these guys this year. And to go to the limit and play as many home games as possible is really special. And to do it in style today, to move on to the 16, it's, you know, what everybody hopes to be a part of.

To do it the way this group does it, to capture an entire fan base the way they have and then to do it again with a national audience, I'm so excited for everybody and more people to get to know them as their platform grows.

So that's my preeminent emotion and thought. Nebraska is a great program, a great team, very well coached. They're here for a reason. Incredible inside game. Great point guard play, and really gritty tough defense, I thought, today. And they adapted as the game went on. I was impressed by that.

It was a chess match in the middle, especially. I thought it was two different games. Like the first quarter and fourth quarter seemed great. The second and third seemed weird. But that's basketball. Just couldn't be more proud of this team all the way through the lineup and the roster and our staff for getting them ready to put them in a



position, and they capitalized in a big way today. It was a great win.

Also, real quick, want to say thank you to everybody that put this on, from NCAA reps all the way through, I just thought it was a first-class weekend here at Oregon State. I'm really thankful for everybody's efforts.

Q. You guys have held your first two opponents to a combined 10-of-47 shooting from the 3, while shooting 17-of-51 yourselves, exactly a third, 33.33 percent. What do you think has allowed you to be so successful in doing so, and how do you plan on implementing or hoping to continue that in the future versus your next opponent?

TIMEA GARDINER: We pride ourselves on defense. Coach Scott has held us to a different standard and expectation this year than previous, than last year. And we hold each other to that as well. So we know what we're capable of and we know how we can defend teams, and we're not done yet.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think to add to that, just the job that our staff does on the scout and preparing us for who we want to take shots and what shots we want to force people into.

They had a lot of great shooters out there tonight. So running them off the 3-point line was part of the scout. So they put us in such a great position, and the scouts are so detailed, and we hold each other to those details. So it's easy to be successful when they do that work for us.

Q. To be able to do this in front of so many people that love and adore you, family, friends, everybody in the community, to do it here, how sweet is it?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: It's amazing. Obviously Beaver Nation has been showing up for us all year. I'm so grateful to be able to have this game at home in front of all of them and to share that experience with our best friends. That's what we say, playing in front of 8,000 of our best friends or however many we had tonight. It's incredible. For me and my family and my best friend and her family



got to come for the first time this year. I can't even explain how grateful I am to have that opportunity, and just really exciting.

TIMEA GARDINER: Yeah, I mean, I'm super grateful as well. It's really big to have the support we have in Corvallis and to do it on a national stage as well, to grow our fan base, is really cool. To have my family here means a lot too. Both my parents drove up from Utah. So to have them here means a lot.

Q. T and T, this team seems to really play well when you all are joyful. That's kind of different. Like a lot of teams get angry and play well. I'm not saying that you're not motivated by that, but why do you think that is that you play best when you're joyful, when you're smiling? Raegan came in here the other day and couldn't stop smiling. It was kind of crazy.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think we have those conversations about, this is what you grow up dreaming about, and these aren't moments that we should take for granted, and we're so blessed to be in this position.

So we talk in the locker room about just staying present, taking it all in. Obviously we're going to go out there and compete. But these are moments, these are games that we're going to tell our kids about that we're going to remember for the rest of our lives.

Just having that gratitude and being present in those moments is something that we emphasize to each other, and I think that's super special and super important.

So that allows us to play with that joy because we're just so grateful to be in this position in front of these fans with this staff, with each other. So that makes it easy to go out there and put a smile on your face.

TIMEA GARDINER: T kind of hit it. But it's also going to Italy this summer kind of cemented our team chemistry, too. So it's really easy to have fun with each other.

We really truly are playing with our best friends every single day. To be able to have the opportunity to play basketball in front of Beaver Nation with your best friends, what can be better than that?

Q. Nebraska specifically mentioned that the 10 blocks you guys had against them, had them a little bit frazzled and frantic on the offensive end. Timea, I think you had four of them as a team. Did you guys feel that they were rushing shots or just scared of your block?

TIMEA GARDINER: To go back to what T said about the scout, our coaches do a phenomenal job of making sure that our scout is accurate. So we just go out there and execute, and we were able to anticipate a lot of their shots today, too.

Yeah, I feel like we frustrated them a little bit, for sure. And it definitely worked out in our favor.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think, obviously everyone did a great job, but TG's growth on the defensive end is phenomenal, just from, obviously her freshman year, but from the beginning of the year until now.

You know, when she's one-on-one down there on the post, I'm standing on my person, just watching her work. I have so much trust in her.

And that's grown throughout the season, too, where if she's one-on-one down there, I have all the faith in the world that she's going to get a stop or she's going to get a block or make them miss.

Obviously she's a great shooter. She's a great teammate, all those things, but her growth on that side of the floor has been amazing for us, and it's just going to continue to be so huge for our success going forward.

Q. You came out today much more aggressively offensively it looked like. Was that by design?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: A little bit. I think I knew that they were going to kind of key in on Rae, and they like to over-help and kind of clog the paint. I knew I would have to be aggressive and hit shots. I've been getting a lot of shots the last couple of weeks and being ready for this moment. I definitely knew coming in, if I was open, I gotta knock down shots tonight.

Q. It's a big game. You all came out -- you both did, with a little extra in your step. With those first two shots you hit, did it get you thinking you'd have some opportunity today?

TIMEA GARDINER: Yeah. My teammates find me in open positions. I was talking to T before the game, we were just talking about little things we could do to get easy shots. Practicing in warmups as well.

But my teammates find me, and I just hit my shot when it's open, and just staying ready is a big thing. I think our bench, too, stayed ready. Everybody stayed ready, that's a big thing about our team. Super proud of everybody.

Q. At some points during this game your guys' best



offense was your defense out there. You mentioned that the identity of this team is defense. You've been held to a higher standard. How does it feel to see that pay off on the biggest of stages?

TIMEA GARDINER: It means a lot. It has gone with a lot of hard work, a lot of grinding. Tough practices, for sure. But it's awesome to have the confidence in each other and the trust in each other that I got your back, you've got mine. And we play like that, defensively and offensively.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think that's just the foundation, especially tonight. We missed shots. We had a really long drought of not scoring, and I think with some teams that can cause you to unravel or get sped up or feel pressure, but when you're taking care of business on the defensive end, it kind of lets you relax a little bit on offense and just knock down your shots, because you know you'll get stops.

So it's how can we execute and get shots and knock them down. And I think that's what it takes to win in March is to have a defense like that, so we have so much trust in our defense. So just problem solving throughout the game of how we can get great shots and then having the confidence to knock them down.

Q. I was going to bring up your scoring drought and how you bust off three straight 3-pointers in that fourth quarter. Was there any specific adjustment that was made, any message you guys heard in the huddle that kind of allowed, maybe, some extra opportunities to create those shots for you guys?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think, like I said, just relying on our defense. We talked about the 11-possession drought and just how we needed to clean things up on offense, and we were getting some good looks. There were some times we missed some open shots. So it was just a matter of knocking them down.

But TG and Lily, especially, I just told them, keep shooting. TG can miss 10 shots in a row, I'm still hitting her on that pop every single time. I'm in her face if she doesn't shoot it. That's what they do; they're shooters. We just have to keep that confidence and keep going and relying on our defense to get stops when the ball's not going in.

But we have shooters on this team, just keeping that confidence and doing what we do.

Q. How would you rate Timea as a defender coming into this season, and how much work she's put into becoming really pretty good at that facet of her game?

SCOTT RUECK: How would I rate her? She's never been bad. I mean, she's a great basketball player. There's another level, though, that she needed to hit, just an accuracy and anticipation that the three months that she missed during her freshman year had an effect on her last year, and that slowed her progress going into this year.

So the more reps she got, as we went and as the bar raised for this team, and you think of Kelsey coming in and joining our team and playing a similar position as her, and Kelsey had three years of experience in this conference).

That really put a, I think, a very healthy -- I don't know -- competitive situation for Timea. It just created urgency and growth, not only in defensive accuracy but also in rebounding the ball.

And those two things were the focal point going into it. And to Timea's credit, she embraced it with humility and recognized it. She's like, yeah, I've got to step up in those areas. Watching film, she's like, man -- it was kind of eye-opening to her to understand that there was growth necessary, and then she's become one of our best defenders.

And she's one of the people that sets the tone for us on the boards. So it's been amazing to watch her just embrace what was a weakness in her game and make it one of the things we're talking about right now. It's incredible.

Q. Nebraska specifically pointed to the 10 blocks as having a big impact. What did you see that, one, helped you guys get those blocks but also set the tone for the rest of the defense?

SCOTT RUECK: Well, being in the way. Being in the way is the main thing. And this game came down to -- well, our defensive game plan came down to can we guard their post one-on-one. I didn't know going into it -- I thought we could slow her. I didn't know if we could stop her. I didn't know exactly what that was going to be like.

And so that was one thing. And we know everybody. We scout. So we know what they want to do. And we know what they also can do. We also know what they don't want to do. And we try to make them do that the whole time.

I thought our defensive positioning was excellent today, whether it was Rae, Timea or Kelsey, on the inside anyway. Then we've got length at the guard spot. This team's identity, they talk about development defensively and how we hold them to standards. Well, the standard it's shifted now. We've done our part, but now it's the culture of this group. So they hold each other to that standard now.

They're like, if you're going to let this team shoot 3s, you could be in for a long night. That's what they do. So this group chased so hard on the 3-point line, and our length allowed us to get pieces of perimeter shots as well. So the way that we play defense, we don't get tons of steals, but we make it difficult to be comfortable shooting the ball always. And that was evident tonight.

Q. Raegan picks up her fourth, I think, with like a minute left in the third quarter; you try and sub her out. It doesn't work out until the fourth. But she never comes back into the game, and you guys played some of your best ball over that next three minutes. Can you kind of talk about what you saw out of your team in that specific stretch and the way they responded to that moment?

SCOTT RUECK: Well, we're a deep team. We're a deep team, and unfortunately we've had stretches of play and stretches of games without Rae. So we're very comfortable without her on the floor, and we know how to play without her on the floor.

That's the silver lining in her missing. Maybe we win that SC game. Maybe we win the Washington game. Maybe we beat Stanford with her. I don't know. But if you look at the big picture, maybe we're better in the long run for her missing those games. Certainly you'd never want that. But if you have to find a silver lining, maybe it was that. So this team really -- I thought we moved the ball very well. We're just a different team because Timea can stretch the floor.

So it puts a little bit more pressure on the defense in some other ways when we're small like that. And then the thing that really was incredible was Timea's defense in the post. And that's something that allows us to go small, to have a player like her that can bang with a true 5 and then be a 4 or a 5 on the offensive end, that's a tough match-up for everybody. It just seemed the right thing to do to continue to roll with it, and I guess it paid off.

The media in the fourth, do we put her back in? Should we not? I don't know. It just seemed the right thing to do to keep rolling with who we had out there. Good problem, I guess.

Q. I was curious about your thoughts about the question I asked the players, when Talia hit, I think it was her 3 in the fourth quarter, you had a pretty big smile on your face. I'm sure part of it was, finally we got some offense going.

SCOTT RUECK: Yes.

Q. What's that like? Because I sometimes get 2016 vibes from this group, just how much they like each other. How much do you enjoy coaching players who have a lot of joy?

SCOTT RUECK: You also get 2009 vibes from that, you in particular. That is a very special quality of this team. When you have a group that has bought into each other, like this group has -- I won't say bought into the coaches. That usually comes with it because otherwise it's not fun for anybody.

So we're all part of this. But when the team is, for lack of a better word, vibing like this group does, it's beautiful to watch. Every day is fun. Every drill is fun. I mean, that's just who they are. They have a great time playing basketball, and they know they're all sacrificing for each other and there's no weird egos or anything where we win a game, everybody's happy. Not just the person that played a lot. Everybody's happy. Everybody's celebrating. Everybody's happy for each other. And that's been consistent throughout the year.

So there is that deep camaraderie with this group that they're truly each other's biggest fan. And I tell them all the time. I'm like, what you're a part of right now is so special in life, don't take it for granted. And I just want to keep reminding them because I know how rare it is to be a part of that. That's what this group has. We don't look young. We don't look young. We didn't look young today.

We had moments that weren't pretty, but give Nebraska credit for that. But this group, we look like a team that's kind of been there/done that. They're playing in the tournament, going to the 16, and only one person's ever even played -- well two, with Kelsey -- has ever played in the tournament before. It didn't look like it.

That's a credit to the atmosphere that they create for each other. It's very, very special. And for a coach I know it's very special. So it makes me happy.

Q. Question about the next game. Let's say you got that Almanac from "Back to the Future" and you got to know one step from the next game, what would it be?

SCOTT RUECK: Who are we playing?

Q. Notre Dame. I'm confident.

SCOTT RUECK: I'm not. We'll see when it happens.

I don't know. I'd love to win the boards. I'd love to win the boards. That's probably one. So defensive field goal percentage is something I always look at. So today we

had a really long, two long ugly stretches of basketball from an offensive standpoint. They did a great job and made us miss. I thought we were a little unfocused in the way we executed. We didn't handle the lead great during that stretch.

But our defense never stopped. Never stopped. So when we're making you miss and we're making you shoot well below your average percentages, we'll have a shot in that game.

So if I had to pick one, I'd say defensive field goal percentage.

Q. I should have said excluding field goal percentage.

SCOTT RUECK: Our rebounding. Can I say rebounding? Turnovers. How many 3s, that we make ten 3s. That's a good question.

Q. You held them under 30 percent shooting three out of four quarters. Is your team playing its best defense overall right now?

SCOTT RUECK: Probably, I say probably because we've seen everything now and we can adapt on the fly a little bit better than we have. I think just every layer of experience adds up. I think that's where we're at now.

We've kind of done a little bit of everything. We can shift to zone if we need to. We can do different variations in our 5 defense, player to player. And because of that we're a little more accurate than we've ever been.

So I'm finding myself -- there's a few things I don't have to say as often, which means it's all the way in, you know? And so yeah, I think we're probably playing our very best on that end of the floor.

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