

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Dakota State vs Utah

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Spokane, Washington, USA

McCarthy Athletic Center

## South Dakota State Jackrabbits

**Aaron Johnston**

**Paige Meyer**

**Brooklyn Meyer**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: With us now are players from the 12th seeded South Dakota State. We have Paige Meyer, a junior from Albany, Minnesota, and Brooklyn Meyer, a sophomore from Larchwood, Iowa. We'll open it to questions for the ladies.

**Q. Brooklyn, I asked Alissa earlier -- she was the Pac-12 Player of the Year a year ago, and obviously you're the Summit League Player of the Year, Defensive Player of the Year this year. I asked her her thoughts on the matchup, and she's probably the top ten player in the country right now. How are you approaching that matchup? Is it one you're looking forward to? What are you expecting when you go against her?**

BROOKLYN MEYER: I'm looking forward to it. She's obviously a really good player. I feel like it will be a good challenge for me defensively to try to do everything that I can. Yeah, I have a lot of respect for her. Obviously we're going to just give our best effort.

**Q. (No microphone). As being the point guard and the leader of this team, a lot of praise for how hard you guys play. How much maybe respect do you have for a coach giving you that kind of praise?**

PAIGE MEYER: We really respect that, like Brooklyn said. We respect Utah too. They like to play fast. I think it's something that as a team we like to do too. I think it will be a fast-based game.

**Q. Dru is going to be at the game. She's obviously got some ties there. Any chatter in the locker room about**



**maybe some beef? What's going on with that?**

PAIGE MEYER: No, we didn't get any insight either. It will be fun to see Dru out there. Yeah, her being part of both programs is kind of a cool thing for her.

**Q. Now that you guys have kind of had a couple of days to look into the film, what stands out to you most about the matchup with Utah?**

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, like we said, they like to play fast, and they have a lot of really good shooters and obviously a really good post player. I feel like just being solid defensively and being able to adjust to all the different things they do is going to be big for us.

**Q. You guys were on this stage a year ago, played in the NCAA Tournament. What would it mean to go back-to-back years of at least winning one tournament game?**

PAIGE MEYER: For sure. Last year was a lot of fun, being a part of this, and we're glad to be back here this year. We take it one game at a time, so we'll see what we can do tomorrow night.

**Q. I do have one more for you, Brooklyn. In terms of, we talked about it throughout the season, but now that it's actually here, compared to a year ago, you didn't play much in the tournament a year ago, but now you're going to be in a much bigger role. Is there any maybe difference in the way you approach this weekend and how you've been preparing for the postseason this time around?**

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, maybe a little bit. I feel like our whole team has a lot of young players that have stepped up this year. I feel like we're all excited to get this opportunity and get this chance to just go out and do what we do and, yeah, see what happens.

THE MODERATOR: Aaron Johnston of No. 12 seeded South Dakota State. Would you like to make a few opening remarks.



AARON JOHNSTON: We're anxious to get going and kind of get us back into a playing mode. We've been off here since Tuesday of last week, which a lot of teams are this time of year.

It's a good time to take a break but also reset and build up as you get ready for a really important event. We're proud of this team, just as every coach is that gets a chance to play in the NCAA Tournament.

I really think, I believe this is our 12th time playing in the NCAA Tournament. It doesn't get old. Every time it seems a little bit new. You go to different places. You take different teams. You have different experiences, different opponents, and I would say every one feels really special. I think this one's going well here, and we're looking forward to getting out on the floor.

**Q. Coach, talk about your senior leadership in Tori Nelson, and especially in her play, championship game, 7-0 run that she personally had really epitomizes the winning effort she has given from the first day she stepped onto the campus and into your practice facility. Talk about the importance of Tori to this team.**

AARON JOHNSTON: Tori's been with us, as a lot of players right now have been, for a long time. Fifth year, and she's used that additional year, and she's had a ton of success with us. I think she's lost maybe a total of four conference games in her five-year career.

So Tori is a winner, one of the best winners we've ever had. I think you hear that, and you automatically assume winning games versus losing games, that's part of it. But she's just a winner for all of the things that Tori does to help our team be successful. She's a captain. She's very vocal with our team. As a player, she does whatever is asked of her.

This year, because of injuries and some adversity, I think Tori has played all five positions at some point. Very few people can do that as a senior. We've got a couple of younger players that lead us maybe statistically. A lot of seniors might really push and crave that spotlight and that attention, but Tori just wants to see people around her do well.

So Tori really kind of raises her play when it's needed, and that championship game for us is a great example. We were in a close game, and Tori made three big baskets down the stretch that really iced the game. For her, her story is not done yet. We hope to keep writing. But that was such a great moment and a great example of what Tori's done for our program.

To have that kind of few minute stretch in front of 8,000 people is a great memory for Tori and her family. But I think our team feels that same way. It's a great moment for our team because I think everybody on the team feels that way about Tori.

**Q. Talk about Brooklyn Meyer's play coming into this tournament, Summit League Player of the Year, Defensive Player of the Year. In conversations we had even last year, you said she had the game to be a starter for you last year, but there was just so many players ahead of her. So there is development, but you certainly saw this potential happening. Talk about, though, what she has done for this team.**

AARON JOHNSTON: Brooklyn's really one of the best post players around. She's really talented. Early in the year as a sophomore, we had games like that where she would really take over and have great games, great stretches.

Also, we were a little up-and-down early on as an offensive team. Brooklyn, as a post player, that's a position that relies on everybody else too. You have to be able to make shots around her, have to be able to get her the ball. As everybody else started to play better offensively too, I thought Brooklyn's game really took off as well.

In our league, she doesn't catch the ball without two or three people around her. She's really dominant down there. She's grown into a fantastic passer. She creates a lot of offense, not only for herself, but for others. From last year to this year, she worked incredibly hard. She's in fantastic shape. She plays with a really high motor. She can play a lot of minutes for us, and she does it offensively and defensively.

Even from last December when we played out here, it's just completely different and grown a lot as a player. She's a huge part of our success, and as a sophomore, it's rare to see somebody do all the things she can do offensively and defensively on the floor.

**Q. You had a 21-game win streak and you haven't lost since December, and of course you were out here a week before Christmas. What has changed about this team that has made you so efficient offensively and maybe even a better defensive team?**

AARON JOHNSTON: At that time, we were just still getting healthy. Paige Meyer, our point guard, had just come back from missing, I think, three games or four. She was on minute restrictions at that point. So she wasn't even playing full games. We were just really kind of

limping along then.

As we got going, one, we just got healthier and were able to get some key players back in the lineup and playing well. Then I think a lot of our younger players really grew.

As much as we rely on Tori as a senior, Paige Meyer, our point guard, as a junior, everybody else at that time was still a lot of sophomores, and even our other juniors, Mady Vlastuin and Mesa Byom, at that time were still new to their roles. We just asked an awful lot out of a new or -- I don't want to say inexperience as a negative, but inexperienced with game minute team.

As we got more and more comfortable and confident in what we're doing, we really started to take off. We defended really well all year at a high level. Offensively, we've played very, very well the last several weeks or months. Our team has really changed, grown, and improved over the course of the entire season.

It's fun to see as a coach. That's really what you want. You want to continue to get better and hopefully play your best here at the end.

**Q. Coach, do you feel it's almost a bit like poetic in a way that you kind of mentioned that around Christmastime you were here and you were just kind of limping along. Now a lot of the injuries, it's been known -- and everyone else, I just asked Mesa how you feel about yourselves as a team, and she said everyone feels really set in their roles, really confident in their roles. Do you feel it's maybe poetic justice that you get to come back here where you played and feel like you weren't playing your best. Now you feel like you're playing your best and you're going to get put to the test against some of the best teams in the country?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, we're excited about that. I think we'd be excited no matter where we're playing. Hopefully we have a little better mojo than the last time we played here. That was a game we just didn't play well. Obviously they're very good, so they make teams not play well.

But we are a very different team. But you also have to assume at this point in the year other teams are different too. As we get ready for Utah, they've grown, and they've gotten better as their year's gone on. They've got a couple of the best players in the country at their position we have to go up against.

I have no doubt we're playing our best basketball, but whoever we play as we go forward, starting with Utah, is going to be playing their best basketball. There will be big

challenges.

But our team, I think, to use what you said Mesa commented on, everybody is really confident in what's expected of them. Nobody steps on the floor or is unsure or lacks that purpose or vision about how they can help us succeed.

And that's fun. That allows players to play at a high level. When they're really, truly valued in that role and they see that value, it really can be special. That's where our team has taken off a little bit.

**Q. You mentioned that Utah's going to have some of the best players in the country in their positions. Pili, obviously, she's a Third Team All-American. I don't know -- I apologize if it's been asked already, but just what kind of challenges does maybe she present because even her head coach said she's a bit of a unicorn in just the mix of her size, her finesse, and her shooting touch as well on the outside. She's such a problem for other teams. Just how do you as a coach go after the type of player she is?**

AARON JOHNSTON: She is really versatile, talented. There's very few things that she can't do. She makes a lot of what they do on offense work really well. Also part of what makes her as good as she is is all that shooting and talent and skill on the perimeter too. You can have somebody of her skill on the outside, and if they lacked that kind of shooting, she wouldn't be the kind of player she is.

They fit really well together just like we fit really well together. The two styles have some similarities. Specific to her, she's just a challenge. She shoots it so well, passes it so well, can score in the post, so physical, and draws fouls. We're going to have to do a great job about trying to help, be smart about how we do it, mix up some things, and try not to let her get comfortable without forgetting about all the other good players at the same time.

**Q. You guys are a trendy pick as far as an upset pick. Not to -- I'm sure you probably couldn't care less about that, but as far as what it says about the program, how much respect do you gain from that just as far as knowing that you guys are kind of becoming a more nationwide, household name?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Like I said, this is our 12th run in this tournament. So there's a lot of history there. We've won games. Last year we beat USC in the first round. We've been to the Sweet 16, and we've had other successes.

For us, we just want to continue to grow as a program, and I think to do that for us right now, not only making national tournaments, the NCAA Tournament, it's time to win games in the NCAA Tournament. I think our team is really unified in that. I think they believe in that. I think they're really committed to that.

So we want to have a great experience here, but we want to find ways to win games here, and that's how we'll be measured. However people view us before the game happened and how they view us after is probably more important.

**Q. I know their coach mentioned -- obviously we know all about the situations your team has had with injuries, but they've had the same thing as well with a couple of scorers going down early. A little bit of a mirror image with that. Does that add a little bit of intrigue, a little bit that they kind of -- each team kind of shares a little bit that you kind of know that you can't take anything for granted from them if they get down a little bit? Both of these teams know in each other that there's no deficit, there's no situation that either one can't overcome?**

AARON JOHNSTON: I think so. You've really seen that across the country. This has been a year where there's been a lot of injuries to really key players. We're dealing with it. Utah's dealing with it. But I've seen that for a number of other teams, and no real good idea why, but it's been a tough year.

So, yeah, I think you can relate to what people are dealing with, and I think you empathize with that because those are really tough losses. I've said it a lot this year. It's not just statistics or positions or people. As much as we want to succeed, we want to succeed against the very best, and we feel that other teams would against us too.

We certainly empathize with it. Both teams now seem to be really settled with the groups they have and still find ways to play at a really high level.

**Q. You touched on it a minute ago about kind of building the reputation of the program and winning games in the NCAA Tournament. What would it mean to win it, for a second straight year win at least one game in the Big Dance against Utah tomorrow?**

AARON JOHNSTON: It always feels good to win at this level. At this level you're playing against the very best teams in the country. Seeding matters because it's a reflection of what everybody has done up until this point.

But it's been great to see in women's basketball that

seeding doesn't necessarily always hold true. What will make this tournament continue to be more and more exciting is to have some upsets, to see more parity. I think this year is an example of that.

There are a lot of teams that are very capable of winning in these first couple of rounds and moving forward, and I think we're certainly one of those teams. I know Utah is certainly one of those teams.

I think you're getting to a point where the tournament's really grown to that level. A lot of teams are capable of having success. I think for us it's about being really focused on what we do well and trying to handle that emotion and excitement of it and finding a way to play well tomorrow.

Yeah, I feel like we want to be measured. We want to be thought of as a team that can advance in the NCAA Tournament, and we get a chance to prove that.

**Q. One last one, Aaron. The mentality of this team, and you've shared it throughout the season, about playing for each other. We've obviously documented a lot of different reasons to play for each other, to pick each other up in a season that has had a shortened roster. Could you speak to how important those conversations -- because you mention often they're not just numbers, they're not just stats, they're just not numbers of jerseys, they're names, they're people, and we talked about it throughout the season about how they have picked it up and wanted to play for each other.**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think that's been really important. Because of our injuries, because of our adversity, we've had to be really good in that area at all times. I think even without the injuries, had we been 100 percent healthy, that would still be our focus and plan.

There's just no doubt that college athletics is very different now than it was five years ago, ten years ago. It trends in a more transactional kind of short-term way for a lot of rosters and programs. I think for us to be our very best, we've got to be really invested in people and have people come and stay with us and grow with us and then graduate from South Dakota State.

We've been able to do that really well over the years. So this year it's been really important because we've just been so banged up and dealing with the emotion of that but also trying to win games. It's also just a great reminder the importance of that and the value of that approach regardless of what you're dealing with.

These are just -- I mean this with great respect -- young people trying to do the best they can. Our job is to help them, support them, and put them in positions to be successful.

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