

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oregon vs Vanderbilt

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Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

Oregon Ducks Coach Kelly Graves

Media Conference

KELLY GRAVES: The Ducks are happy to be here and excited for this opportunity. The trip yesterday and coming here on campus today brings back great memories. It was eight years ago that we came down here as the same 10 seed. We had a couple of freshmen by the name of Sabrina Ionescu and Ruthy Hebard. And we played really well and happened to win both games. That was the start of our women's basketball program in a lot of ways. It kind of put us on the map.

Just happy to be here. We'd love for that magic to happen again. But we'll wait and see. We've got obviously a really tough team that we've got to play. Vanderbilt is just really, really good.

It's contrast of styles. We want to grind it out. They want to get out and go. If we have to get out and go with them, we're in trouble. There we go.

Q. Obviously this Vanderbilt at the moment, like you said, contrast in styles. Mikayla Blakes is one of the more talented players in the country, 50-plus points a couple of games this year. Challenges of defending her and general things you saw on film about this Vanderbilt team?

KELLY GRAVES: She's obviously a fantastic player. They're more than just her. But, boy, I'll tell you, she reminds me a little bit of Jordin Canada who we had to play against for four years. I liken her to a jet airplane. If she is on the runway, taking off, we can't catch her.

We've got to make sure that we defend her collectively. We've got to somehow make this a half-court game because she's so good in the open court. She's great in the half court as well.

Looking at all their synergy statistics, it's incredible how



efficient they are, not just in transition, not off just turnovers. In the half court, they're equally as good. They're just a very well-rounded team.

It's going to be a challenge defending her. She's a great player. We have JuJu Watkins in our league, so we know what great guards look like. She's definitely in that discussion for sure.

Q. For the first time there's units for women's basketball teams for March Madness. You've been around this game for a minute. How big is that for the sport, finally getting some revenue and for the teams that have been here for a while?

KELLY GRAVES: Well, long overdue. Well deserved. I think we've earned it. I think there's other changes we can talk about later. I don't want to talk about today, that we can still do to make the NCAA Tournament better. But I think that's a necessary, you know, advancement.

I don't think much about it as a coach because it doesn't really matter to me, but we just want to go out and do the best we can. I'm going to coach my team and all that other stuff. I'll let the politicians take care of that and the NCAA people.

Q. This is a rare spot with three women's first rounds within a 20-minute radius and men's --

KELLY GRAVES: And my son, who's coaching the University of Florida men's staff -- a lot of basketball people down here.

Q. This is a hotbed, it seems, for basketball this week. Couple of West Coast teams here, probably not great travel-wise, but for this to be the epicenter of the NCAA Tournament for the next couple of days.

KELLY GRAVES: It's ironic -- Washington, Oregon State and Oregon, we're all out here in North Carolina. Kind of odd, about as far away as we can go. It's really neat.

I wish I wasn't coaching a team right now in a crazy sort of way because then you could just sit and watch games. I



think that's really neat.

But I think in my lifetime, Tobacco Road has always been the kind of epicenter of college basketball. I've grown up kind of knowing that this is what it's like down here.

But, yeah, I think really neat. I mean really neat. And it just goes to show you how strong women's basketball is in this area. To have three elite teams hosting like this. I can just imagine how those rivalries play out each and every year. Incredible.

Q. What are you telling your freshmen that are coming into their first March Madness? How are you preparing them for the cultural change of regular season to postseason?

KELLY GRAVES: Well, we had a short run in postseason already in the Big Ten Tournament. We hopefully will do a little bit better than we did then.

Yeah, I think anytime you have youngsters you rely on your experience. Thank goodness we have some experienced guards that have been in this situation before, led by Deja. I know you just talked to her. I asked them to really help the young players.

But I think anytime you go to the NCAA Tournament, you should always play with a kind of nothing-to-lose attitude, have fun. At this point, we're not going to reinvent ourselves. We are who we are. Our players should feel prepared. And they understand what we want to do.

And I think for freshmen, it's important that they have that kind of blanket, security blanket, that they know what's going to be asked of them, that we're not going to ask any more.

It's a big stage. I think early on we want to take advantage of that because they've got some young players, they've got some talented players, but they're still young. Mikayla, this is her first NCAA Tournament.

Hopefully she's really tight. So give her some tough questions. (Chuckling).

Q. Obviously you won a bunch of games, double digit seed in your career. Is there an approach or a style of play that seems to lend itself to winning games as kind of a 10 or 11 or 12 seed?

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, been there a lot. I guess if you're there a lot then you're going to have more opportunities. But I think we put it out. Chris did a hell of a job there, nine wins, personally, as a coach that I've won as a double digit

seed.

It helped that two of those were Elite Eight runs. I had Courtney Vandersloot one year and Sabrina Ionescu the other year running point. That's a good place to start.

But I think it's just this time of year I tell the team, it matters who you play, the match-up, and then how you play. And we can't worry about the seed. It doesn't really matter at this point.

So we're just going to have, hey, we go out and do the best we can kind of attitude. And that has helped us in the past. I think that's really -- you've got to stay loose.

Q. You've had 1 seeds and 12 seeds. Is the message or approach any different for those type of teams?

KELLY GRAVES: No. No. Not in my experience. I've felt that we've kind of gone into every tournament the same. Even when you're a 1 seed you've got to play with a nothing-to-lose attitude.

I think this time of year the teams that play tight, you know, they struggle because it is a bigger stage and you've just gotta let it loose. It's kind of worked in the past. It's nothing magical. I wish there was some secret sauce, but there's not.

Q. When you first got into coaching it's a lot different than now, probably more Xs and Os and recruiting kids. Seems like now there's more you have to deal with -- NIL, keeping your own kids here instead of going to the portal, things like that. What advice would you give to a person trying to get into coaching now? Is it worth getting into anymore because it seems there's all sorts of stuff that probably isn't what you signed up for when you first started doing this?

KELLY GRAVES: Would I tell someone to get into the profession? Yes, it's a great profession. I love it. I've loved every minute of it. We all have ups and downs. It is different.

But for a young coach getting in, this is all they know. So it's not different to them. We have a football coach, you may have heard, Dan Lanning, young guy, great guy, energetic. He is the new style of coach.

So I actually spent a lot of time with him last spring when I was coming to a crossroads as a coach because a lot of my peers have kind of stepped away in the last year or two because they haven't liked nor wanted to handle the change. We talked it out. He was fantastic and gave me a whole new perspective.

So I still think it's a great profession. We're just going through so many changes so quickly that it's kind of hard to navigate right now, but at some point it will settle down. We'll figure this out and it will be a new model going forward.

I have a great, young staff. They're phenomenal. They keep me young, trying to do things the new way.

But I think we're going to come out of this even better, to be honest with you. Just different.

Q. What's the impact of not having Elisa here in terms of the match-up with Mikayla Blakes and everything?

KELLY GRAVES: Was that Elisa, did you say?

Huge loss for us. For those that don't know, Elisa Mevius broke her hand. She actually did it about a month and a half ago and played a month with a broken right hand. It shows how tough she is.

But our best defender. She can defend elite guards. We're going to miss her. And we have missed her the last couple of games. We haven't been the same defensively as we were early in the year.

She's also a playmaker. So everybody else has got to step up. We have some senior guards -- Nani Falatea, Peyton Scott and Deja Kelly.

You've got to do it by committee. They're more than just Mikayla Blakes. Khamil Pierre is a fantastic player. Moore -- her first name is escaping me right now, but No. 23 -- they are just really good.

And then they have great role players. Those three, everything revolves around those three. And then they have some unselfish other pieces that are key for them to do what they do.

But I think those three are getting about 90 percent of their points or something like that. So it's going to be quite a challenge.

So it would have been nice to have Elisa, but we don't have her. I'm not an excuse-maker. I'm not going to say we got in at 3:30 last night. I won't say that because we don't play until tomorrow. So we'll be good and ready.

But, yeah, we're just not as efficient defensively without Elisa. She's a difference maker.

Q. The two players we talked to, Deja and Peyton,

obviously have different NCAA Tournament resumés. Wonder how each of those can benefit them individually -- Deja's experience, but perhaps Peyton's fresh excitement, enthusiasm, whatever, for this experience?

KELLY GRAVES: Well, we've already relied on Deja a lot with that experience. She's had a lot of success in this tournament.

First time for Peyton, as you said. She's a baller. She's a gamer. She's a tough kid. This is who she is. I think she's lived for these kind of moments. And I'm just glad that she's been rewarded with that this year, an opportunity to play in this tournament.

But those two have been kind of our heart and soul all year. We're going to rely on them a ton.

For Scottie's sake, I'm hoping she has a really great tournament. She's earned it. She's had a tough journey. Couple of ACLs and, with the transfer and everything, and I'm just happy for her.

Q. Obviously you've made the tournament plenty of times and made different runs, but now you have a lot of new faces on the team this year for your first time going into the tournament with them. What's sort of your message to the team heading into this match-up?

KELLY GRAVES: Just have fun. Seriously, have fun. Our message hasn't been anything different than -- if you've been at our practices or any of our team meetings between the regular season and now, you wouldn't be able to tell any difference.

And we've traveled -- this is our sixth time traveling across country. My guess is if you include our trip to Hawaii during Thanksgiving, we had to travel more than any team in the NCAA this year. So the travel shouldn't affect us.

We really have no excuses. We just gotta go in and have some fun and do our best.