

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

## Oregon Ducks Kelly Graves Deja Kelly Nani Falatea

Media Conference

Oregon - 77, Vanderbilt - 73

THE MODERATOR: Welcome into this 2025 NCAA March Madness postgame press conference.

At this time we are now joined by the Oregon Ducks. We have with us head Coach Kelly Graves, along with student-athletes Deja Kelly and Nani Falatea. We will have an opening statement by Coach followed by questions for the student-athletes.

With that, Coach, the floor is yours.

KELLY GRAVES: It was a heck of a basketball game for sure. First I want to give a shout out to Coach Ralph and her team. They obviously didn't quit in that second half. Boy, there was a hole dug for them, but they just competed and competed and showed the true team that they are. That was a helluva game.

I'm proud, though, that we're the ones moving on. I was thinking to myself when does a win feel like a loss feel like a win? I think our emotional gamut hit all phases today.

I'm just really proud of our team. Before the game, I talked about our grit and our toughness. I think that's the one defining characteristic we've had all year, and we showed that late in the game with the defensive stops. There was a lot of great plays. We'll have a chance to talk about that at some point here.

Just a great team effort. Really proud of them, led by these two.



**Q. Deja, it felt like for those first three quarters you guys really imposed your will on the game and were playing the game your way. How was that successful? And then sort of what happened to kind of get away from that in the fourth?**

DEJA KELLY: Yeah, we knew what kind of team that they were. They like to play fast paced, really press. So we tried to keep it at our pace from the jump. Just try to control the pace, control our game, and get the right shots that we wanted and ultimately get stops on the defensive end as well.

I thought we did a really solid job, especially those first three quarters. And the game plan, we just stuck to the game plan. We were focusing on details. We were in our right spots positionally on defense. I think we got good looks offensively. So I think overall we did a really good job of just sticking to the overall game plan.

**Q. For Nani and Deja, just your thoughts on the emotional resilience of the team despite the ups and downs of this game and to be able to hang on down the stretch.**

DEJA KELLY: I mean, it's March, so I think that that's what these games are about. There's lots of ups and downs. I think for us we were all just so dialed in. I'm really proud of our fight, even when things weren't going our way and when Vanderbilt had their little stretch of turning us over and scoring off those baskets, which that's what they are really known for.

We were composed. I think that was the biggest thing for us. Once we did break their pressure in our stretch, we were able to get the shots that we wanted and, again, just control the game and control the pace and play our pace.

Overall, the emotions were high, and we were just having fun out there. I think that is what really led to us playing how we did and overall just playing a really solid game.

NANI FALATEA: Yeah, I agree. I think this is the type of game that we play. We've been in this type of situation ten times over this season, especially playing in the Big Ten.



It's really got us prepared for games like this, gritty games. So this was kind of just a perfect game for us.

**Q. Kelly, just what can you take away from that stretch where Vanderbilt was able to come back and be able to force overtime?**

KELLY GRAVES: I mean, they're a great team. This is what they do. They average 21 1/2 points per game off turnovers. We knew we had to take care of the ball.

Our game plan was quite simple really. We wanted to control pace. We wanted to, defensively at least, win the first eight seconds. They're an elite level team in the first eight seconds of a possession, and we did that by putting that little 1-2-2 tempo press out there to just kind of slow them down.

Really, to your point, for most of the game we played the game at our tempo, exactly what we wanted to do. Then we just kind of lost our composure a little bit. Credit them, they got after us.

As a coach, I should have done a better job of kind of getting us back under control, but ultimately we did and got the win. Yeah, credit them. Credit them.

**Q. Deja, you had a couple big free throws late in the game. Did that feel familiar?**

DEJA KELLY: Yeah, I didn't hit enough, so I'm mad at myself about that. Yeah, definitely familiar. Again, it just feels great to play in this gym.

I think we all had some big plays down the stretch and all hit some big free throws. Scotty hit some big free throws for us, Amina a huge rebound.

I think overall, for me personally, I think it was great and felt familiar, but I think everyone stepped up today.

**Q. Deja, how big did you want a rematch with Duke?**

DEJA KELLY: Honestly, I wasn't really thinking about it that much. Obviously I know we're on their side of the bracket, but I think for me, for us, it was about taking it one game at a time. I think that's what the focus has to be in order to get wins and continue to build in March because anything can happen.

If you look too far ahead, then you're not focused in the moment and focusing on what you have to do for that game and that moment.

Now that I know that we're playing them, I'm super excited.

I'm excited for the team, and we'll get to start scouting. But, yeah, I'm really happy that we got this one and got this one out of the way.

KELLY GRAVES: They've got to beat Lehigh.

DEJA KELLY: Well, you're right. Either team I would be happy to play.

KELLY GRAVES: Just kidding.

DEJA KELLY: I'm like, well, either team, we'd be more than happy to play, but yes.

**Q. Deja, yesterday you said in the press conference that you felt like your guys' depth would come in big in this game, and it felt like without that depth and the play that you guys got from the bench, maybe you guys don't win this game. Can you just speak a little bit about some of the play off the bench -- Katie, Sofia, and so many others contributed in this game to help you guys move on to the round of 32?**

DEJA KELLY: 100 percent, we wouldn't have won that game without Katie herself doing what she did. All of them, but Katie especially carried us in that first half really, came in, got some buckets for us, found teammates, was getting stops defensively. Sofia came up huge defensively, hit some huge 3s in the corner.

When we say we have depth, we mean it, and it shows. We are not winning games without the protection from our bench. They come up huge, and they know how important they are. We just remind each other every day how important every single piece is and how we need everyone to bring their piece, and that's exactly what our bench did today.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, it's Q&A time.

KELLY GRAVES: What you got?

**Q. Kelly, this team had some ups and downs down the stretch of the season, but it seemed like it through that stretch built a sort of mental fortitude that obviously, as you know, can come in handy in March. What's your evaluation of how that showed itself down the overtime stretch?**

KELLY GRAVES: You kind of answered your question right there. Yeah, this is the kind of team that we've been all year long. I think we're 5-0 in games decided by two points or less, so we've been in a lot of these kind of games that can go either way.

We just seemed to make the right plays. We took a couple of charges that fouled a couple of their players out. That doesn't show up in the box score necessarily. Those are winning plays obviously.

Muhammad's offensive rebound on the missed free throw, they're late, that's a winning plays. Our players know how to make winning plays. Sometimes it's not pretty. In fact, you've seen us play a lot this year. Oftentimes, it's not pretty. We just make the plays when they count.

The most important thing is they believe. My team believes that they can win these games even when things weren't going right there for a good portion of that last quarter.

**Q. Mikayla Blakes had 26 points and posed a lot of challenges for your defense. What stood out to you about her game and how she handled her moments as a freshman? And what was your approach to containing her if you can speak on that.**

KELLY GRAVES: Containment was what we talked about. There's no stopping her. Honestly, I don't sleep well during the season anyway, as you can tell from the bags under my eyes, but to watch her -- and I bet I saw eight or nine of their games -- she's an incredible player.

I told our team, even though it's a distant memory for them, most of them don't even know who this is, but she reminds me of Jordin Canada with the jump shot. She's just so quick. We talked about them being a jet airplane. If you let them take off, we can't catch them.

We had to defend with five, make sure we were in good position. Even still, with the amount of attention we gave her, she still puts up 26 points because that's what great players do. I'm really excited to watch how she progresses as a player. She's definitely one of the best players in the country, and she proved it tonight.

It's unfortunate that we don't get a chance to see her again, but I'm a fan. I'm a fan. I'm a fan of Coach Ralph and their whole team.

**Q. Kelly, this is your 10th win as a double digit seed, I think, which is the most of any active coach in the country. Does your program kind of thrive on like an underdog mentality when you get on this stage, do you think?**

KELLY GRAVES: Sure, we'll take that, yeah. Maybe I'm underachieving during the regular season and we should have a higher seed, I don't know.

Yeah, we kind of preached that as soon as we got the bid on TV, the first thing I told the team was this is kind of where Oregon women's basketball was put on the map eight years ago as a 10 seed here in Durham. There's no reason -- we talked all week, it doesn't matter what your seed it at this point, it's who you play and how you play.

We played a great team, but we played well. Yeah, we're moving on. No secret sauce, unfortunately.

**Q. Obviously this part of the country, a lot of reporters are really familiar with Deja from her time at Carolina. What did her leadership bring tonight in particular? And how have you seen her grow this season?**

KELLY GRAVES: Scoring-wise, she hasn't had her best season, but efficiency-wise, one of the reasons she came was to prepare herself for the league, or for the pros, and she is efficiency-wise having the best season of her career. Her rebound numbers are the best ever, two-point percentage, the best ever, assist-to-turnover ratio the best ever.

I'm glad you talked about her leadership. There were a couple times tonight, twice I had to say, Deja, sit down during a timeout. She's coaching them. She's talking to them.

You saw a couple of times, Katie Fiso, our freshman, she was talking to her on the court in big moments. That's the kind of person we were hoping we would get out of Deja and that we did get. She's exceeded every expectation. So we're really happy for her success.

And it's neat, if Duke's fortunate enough to win this game, she'll have a different chance. We won't have to motivate her in any way for sure, not that we would have anyway.

We're just -- we've got good players. They're great kids. We've got awesome chemistry, and they play for one another, and they're really connected.

I'm proud of them, man. I'm really proud of them. I'm proud of you guys, by the way. You know how I tell our team always sit in the front row or the middle. The inverted T, front, middle, you get better grades. You guys got the majority of the questions, so I'm giving you all As. Where are my D students back there in the corners?

**Q. Kelly, I just want to let you know I'm seated in the front row in the press room in Seattle, so I'm joining in spirit.**

KELLY GRAVES: On Zoom. You're the new student-athlete now, Zoom classes.

**Q. For a while in this program, it was kind of assumed that you guys would be making deep NCAA Tournament runs. If we're counting 2020, and I am, it would have been five straight Sweet 16s for you all, and then the last three years happened. Just what does it mean to you to be back on this stage, and not only be back on this stage, but win a game on this stage?**

KELLY GRAVES: It means a lot. The last couple years, we just weren't the program that we'd been for a variety of reasons. That's why this has been so sweet honestly. I've been reenergized. This team has made me, even at 62 years old, feel a lot younger, and they've been fun to coach.

It's really given me -- my love for the profession has gotten even better. We're not focused on looking backward. If I look too far backward, five years ago that was an amazing team that we had a chance to win it all, and we didn't. We've kind of been up-and-down since, but hopefully this win will get us kind of on the right trajectory back right back to where we want to be as a program.

**Q. Kelly, I just wanted to ask about Peyton's game. You talk about things going unnoticed, she grabs the rebound, she draws the offensive foul on Blakes to foul her out, she hits the jumper to put you ahead in overtime. I know this is her first NCAA Tournament game, so from your vantage point, how much did this mean to her, and how huge was she down the stretch?**

KELLY GRAVES: She's been our heart and soul the last two years. Last year she didn't get to play because of her injury in the first game of the season, but she was with us every step of the way during a tough time. Then I'm just happy to see her rewarded for her hard work. This is an experience she's going to remember for the rest of her life.

But she means a ton to us, one of my favorite all time players that I've ever coached. I'm happy for her. All her family came down from Ohio, so it was really neat to see everybody.

I don't know why I'm looking over there. Anyway, yeah, Peyton means everything to us. She is a Duck through and through. She is what makes us who we are.

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