

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Michigan State vs Oklahoma

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Norman, Oklahoma, USA

Lloyd Noble Center

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Jennie Baranczyk

Raegan Beers

Payton Verhulst

Media Conference

Oklahoma 77, Michigan State 71

Q. Talk about how physical this game was.

RAEGAN BEERS: Obviously it's March Madness, so it's going to be -- physicality is the name of the game. We play in a conference that is extremely physical, and so that prepared us well for this, which was great, but Michigan State is a physical team, a phenomenal team. Obviously they have some great shooters, great inside presence, and proud of us for pulling it through tonight.

Q. How about the guards?

PAYTON VERHULST: I guess I'll take it in a little bit of a different direction, but shout-out to our strength coach because we looked strong out there.

RAEGAN BEERS: Yeah, we did.

PAYTON VERHULST: I thought we looked strong out there, and I thought obviously there's moments where we can hold our ground more, but the SEC gets us ready for games like this.

RAEGAN BEERS: Shout-out Parker.

Q. You talked about the SEC getting you guys ready for this, but you guys have both made some big runs in the NCAA Tournament. You seem to be both very comfortable down the stretch. How much was that experience a help for you guys trying to carry your team across the finish line tonight?



RAEGAN BEERS: To be in an environment we were helped a lot, especially for our freshmen who maybe it was their first time, but to be in an atmosphere like that where we have a great crowd that's cheering for you, it makes it a lot easier to make it down the stretch and finish out tough games, which I think we did really well tonight.

Obviously experience does play a role in that. We know who to pass it to obviously, who we want on the free-throw line, things like that, but that also comes with practicing a lot through the season, which we of course have done and the energy in the gym was awesome.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, obviously we both made deep runs in the tournament, but I thought Zya looked so comfortable out there at the end of the game, especially an underclassman, sophomore, she only has one tournament under her belt, but I thought at the end she made some really big plays for us, and that's really big, so I think there's a lot of benefit in having that experience under your belt. You can see it from year to year.

Q. Raegan, it looked like there were a lot of emotions for you at the end of the game. What was going through your mind as the final horn sounds?

RAEGAN BEERS: Gratitude. I love this place. I love these people. It was fun to end it in the LNC with this team. Payton won't cry. I'll cry for her. This is a really cool team, a coaching staff that has poured a lot into me for two years that I'm so, so grateful for and a team that has loved on me since I minute I came last year and this year, so they continue to develop you as people, not just as basketball players, which I really appreciate, so my off court has just gotten so much better just as much as my on court has, so I appreciate with that Coach Jennie and the rest of this team. I'm just thankful for all of them.

PAYTON VERHULST: Raegan is a just a really special teammate and person. Like she said, not even speaking of basketball, you guys get to write and see everything she does on the basketball court, but she's such a great person, and I genuinely mean that. She's one of the most selfless people I've ever met and ever played with, so I wish nothing but the best for her every single time she



steps on the floor, and I know she's going to do great things in the future of basketball and just in her life in general.

Q. Both transfers into this program. Just big picture, second straight Sweet 16, what can you guys speak to the job that Jennie has done building this program?

PAYTON VERHULST: I think for us, this is our expectation now. Like this is our bar. Obviously we made the Sweet 16 last year, and our season didn't end the which we wanted going from there. So I feel like for us we knew we wanted to get to this point for sure, and this was, like, the bare minimum.

I think we put a lot of work in in the off-season and the summer, as a lot of teams do, but I think for us, there was never a doubt in our mind this was where we wanted to be, and we're going to keep going, so we're going to continue to get better and have fun.

RAEGAN BEERS: Yeah, you can tell in the five years that Jennie has been here she has created not just a winning culture but a culture that wants to work and that wants to have fun while winning, and I think that's really cool she's been able to do that in such a short time here and the impact she's had on this program in that short time.

When we play like that, when we have fun, you could see in the second half tonight, it's a lot more fun basketball to watch and a lot more fun to play.

Q. A lot of the games in this tournament to this point have been blowouts. Do you think having a tight game like this going down to the last minute or so, does that help you even more next week? I know you've played a lot of games like this, but a lot of teams in this tournament haven't this week. How much will this help going forward?

PAYTON VERHULST: I mean, going in, we knew Michigan State was going to be a great team, so there's never a doubt in our minds that we knew, honestly, for me that I knew we were going to win. But I think that, whether it's a close game or whether it's a blowout or whatever it is, we want to continue to get better in whatever game we play.

Whether there's a benefit to that, I don't know. Obviously if we could beat a team by 40 every game, I would want to beat them by 40, but that's just being competitive. But I think moving forward now, I think every single game we play in the March Madness tournament is good, and I think that helps our younger girls and helps us just to continue to grow together and build our confidence and build our

chemistry.

RAEGAN BEERS: 100 percent. Going off that, in those close games it gives our younger people experience, and that's sometimes experience they haven't had before, so I think that's beneficial to them as people who maybe have been in close games in March before, now getting to experience that and take it as we go play another really good team.

Q. Jennie, what did it mean to see Payton and Raegan both have those key stretches tonight that led you to a win in their last games here?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know, when you're in it, you don't start thinking about, oh, this is your last game or oh, this. You're just in it, and in those games that are like that, players have to be able to make big plays for you to be able to come out with a win.

I thought we had multiple people making really big plays.

We've talked a lot about Payton lately, and it's been fun to be able to see her really come alive and play. She's just such a fun person to be able to coach. I thought she came up with some big defensive plays, as well, and we're so -- we're really good when she's on the floor, and Raegan is the same way. I thought Raegan was -- I thought she had some really tough finishes in there. I thought it was a really physical game.

I think she doesn't ever get to go one-on-one in a game. It's always one versus pretty much their whole team.

I thought she did some really good things in terms of her positioning. I thought she was steady even when she didn't make some things. I thought her free throws were better when they needed to be.

They're just really special people. They really are. Even Beatrice Culliton coming in in her last game and knocking down her two free throws and being able to do what she did. You don't think of it as their last because you just want to keep coaching them, but at the same time, a fun way for them to be able to go out in the LNC.

Q. Obviously it wasn't the greatest shooting night for Aaliyah, but it seems like she really came up clutch, obviously had the three at the end. What does it say about your trust in her, telling her to just keep shooting?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I think she came out to try to will her team, and I think she learned throughout the game, you could see her come out and press a little bit, and then

you saw her settle in and be able to get the ball, to a point that she's -- what you guys don't see is she's play calling for other people. For her to be able to do that was really good. She hit a really big shot, again, stepping up and hitting free throws, really great experiences. For her to be able to have six assists, too.

She's going to continue to get better and read and put her team in really good positions. There's time and place that she's going to have to continue to make plays, and she's learning that.

Tonight there were some times it was really good, and sometimes the ball didn't go in, and sometimes maybe the decision needed to be different, but she's learning, and I'm just really impressed with how much she wants to learn.

Then you talk about those two making plays, and then you look at the last couple time-outs and something in the huddle happened and then Aaliyah is laughing and then Zya is laughing and it's crunch time; you're not supposed to laugh. But then they're able to turn it back. So the maturity that the two of them have really grown this season has been absolutely incredible, and it's just been fun to be part of that.

Q. Along those lines, I wanted to ask you about Zya --

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Zya was phenomenal.

Q. You get six assists from both her and Aaliyah, five rebounds from the two of them. How impressive was that from a young backcourt like that in a tournament game like this to play the way they did?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, what was really neat for Zya is obviously she made some big plays on the offensive end, but she also -- I thought she just came up with a big rebound, obviously she gets scrappy. But what I think she has done just a great job of, and especially in this game, I thought she just poured into her team so much more than she has.

Zya is not an outward personality. She's not someone that's going to be super loud and have this huge presence. She's just kind of the -- she's just kind of quiet sometimes and she does her job and she just works. That's what's endearing about her.

But yet every one of her teammates that's in there, she believes in them. That's a really cool quality to be able to have. I thought she was absolutely incredible this year, or this game.

Q. This is not a question about officiating, but you had

a great third quarter, even when Raegan wasn't on the floor. You maintained her lead and you won the third quarter to go into the fourth quarter. How big was that quarter, especially when some calls didn't go your way?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I thought Brooklyn Stewart did some really good things for us today. I thought her energy was really good, and it is hard. It was hard -- Sahara Williams had a hard day today with some foul trouble sitting, and that's hard to come back from. That's just part of the game, and unfortunately we have a little too much experience with that.

So you want to keep the flow of the game going, and so do they, but it was a really physical game.

Q. How did the crowd help you guys tonight?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I thought the crowd was really engaged. I thought it was so much fun in terms of the energy.

I think that's what we want. There was a moment in the game where I sat there and I was looking around, and I thought, okay, this is the baseline standard, and that's what you want. When they were talking about that, you want it. You want that lower bowl full, to a point that some day you can't get a ticket here. That's the dream.

So that's something that we've got to continue to go, but everybody that comes loves it, and they're engaged in the game.

I mean, you guys feel it. You guys are all here. People are caring enough. We just need to continue to have more people. If we can put that plug in for next season. But this was the baseline for us, and we just need to have more people because the people that are part of this have been phenomenal, and it's been really, really special to feel the energy.

But imagine how great that energy could be if we just had a few more people.

Q. I wanted to ask about a specific aspect of Aaliyah's growth. First two NCAA Tournament games combined, 11 assists, one turnover, with somebody who's pushing the tempo that much. What does that say about where she's come in that regard because that's an area that she maybe had a little bit of a struggle with earlier on.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, especially with physical teams and especially with pressing teams. So again, like I

said, in her first exhibition game, I felt like she was bringing it up on the sideline, and I was like, get off the sideline. She's like, well, it's physical. I'm like, this actually doesn't count as physical, in an exhibition game. So she's had to learn a lot.

It's just different, and then you go through a whole SEC season that prepares you for a game like today when it is physical, right, and puts you in some positions.

Now, again, I'm not really happy with the turnovers that we had. We had too many careless turnovers in March. But for her personal growth, I think she's just done a really good job of trying to get better.

Q. Jennie, players mentioned the fun that they were having in the second half. You talked about some of the laughing in the huddle. How much is this team fueled by joy, and how important is it for them to kind of walk that line of being locked in but also loose, especially when it gets tight?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, you know, sometimes you mistake fun for outcomes. Sometimes you mistake -- meaning if you make it and everything is going well, then it's fun. But you've got to bring the fun to basketball and then all of a sudden the ball goes in the hole a little bit more.

I think fun and joy is part of who you are, and it's part of the DNA. You can still dive on the floor. You can still rip at someone's hands. You can still take a charge. You can still play really hard on defense. You can still recover when you make a mistake.

It's just part of who we are and what we're going to do because why else do it. Sports is entertainment. You're still disciplined. But that goes into your life. You still want to work hard at your job after. You still want to love what you do. The more that you love what you do, the more passion you put into it, the more that's going to come back. So that's what we want. We want them to have that smile on their face. We want them to recover because when they have that much fun, God, we're good. When we don't, we really aren't.

That's also, I think there's too many examples of when we do have fun, things tend to go right for us. Again, that's life. That's me too. That's you too. That's all of us.

Q. Jennie, when we were here preseason, you look up and down the roster and you see the youth on this team. I know you've talked on them individually, but I'm interested, when you see -- I'm looking on the court and I see three freshmen, a sophomore and a senior in

a game to send you to the Sweet 16, just more so generally about the young class that you have, whether it be the freshmen or the sophomores, the growth and maturity over the course of the season to now have that full trust to be in a tight game like this with everything on the line. What have you seen over the course of the season more generally with them?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Yeah, I don't think there's a hesitation to ever put them in. Some games they're going to play more than others. Sometimes it's a matchup thing. Sometimes it's someone is doing really well. There's different variables in that. Sometimes it's foul trouble, whatever.

But I love that they attack it every day. I think they came in nervous and then they've ended up hungry. You still make mistakes. You still do really good things in both of those spaces. It's just how you do it. So I think they've really grown in how they're doing it right now, but I love watching that. I love watching that growth.

I've said this I can't tell you how many times. I think if there were a most improved player, Zya Vann has to be No. 1 on that list. You look at -- there were games last year she played minimal in games, and for her to be able to now lead us to a Sweet 16, that's pretty incredible.

Q. Jennie, South Carolina is next it looks like. You beat them this year; that's got to help on some level, and your experience last year in the Sweet 16, Connecticut got you at the end, but you led at halftime. Those experiences, how much will that help going into Sacramento?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, experience can't hurt you, right? It can only help you. It wasn't too long ago we also got beat by 40 against South Carolina and then we got beat by 30, and then obviously you know what happened here this year. So for us, you've got to play every minute. If you go against a team like a South Carolina or anybody from here on out, you've got to play every single possession.

That's something that I think our seniors understand that, and our whole team has to go into that. You can't have compromised belief. You can't come in and pout if you don't have something that goes well for you. You've got to play every single possession.

It's not like we played this perfect game and we played South Carolina and it's not like they played a perfect game and we just got them. That game was a long time ago. We're both different. We've both grown a lot at this point.

So yes, it helps you in having experience. It helps you understand that we've earned another week of practice, because young players don't understand that part. But at the same time, you've still got to show up, and you've still got to show up in every possession. We can't have this many turnovers, can't give up free possessions, and we've got to lock in a little bit.

Q. Jennie, we talked about Raegan. This is near the end for her. Aaliyah is just getting started. From the outside looking in, they're kind of the two faces of your program. I'm curious at this point, they have such unique skill sets; how have they continued to sort of mesh their games and maybe accentuate each other as the season has gone on?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I think what makes our team special is we have a lot of two-player game and we have three-player game within what we do.

For those two in particular, you can see the moments that they can really connect. You can see the moments that -- there's times that Aaliyah needs to get it to Sahara to get it to Raegan, so she can lead some of that. You're seeing her really start to -- she is, she's starting to play call to get the ball a lot in to Raegan, so that to me has been really impressive in terms of her growth, and that's probably happened in the last month or so where she's really starting to understand what's happening for everybody.

You come in and you think you understand what's happening for you. So she has to read what's happening for everybody and how she's guarded. People game plan for her, and Raegan is similar. They give her different looks. Sometimes they front her. Sometimes they collapse on her. Sometimes there's two people. Sometimes the whole team goes.

So she sees it from a different angle. I've really liked their two-player game. I think it created a lot of actually 15-foot shots for Raegan, and she can shoot those, and obviously she did today.

But it's fun to watch them really complement one another.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports