

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

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Moody Center

Oregon Ducks
Kelly Graves

Ehis Etute

Katie Fiso

Media Conference



how much did playing in the Big Ten the last two years kind of prepare you guys for the NCAA tournament and what you expect?

KATIE FISO: The Big Ten has prepared us like a lot. There's a lot of great competition in the Big Ten and coach always said it's, all our games, we played like 16 games where it was really close at the end. So I feel like those games have prepared us for March Madness games like this. So, yeah.

EHIS ETUTE: Yeah, the Big Ten conference, you can't really take any games off, so that will always prepare you for obviously when it comes to March Madness. Hopefully that will help and translate over, so I don't really remember the PAC 12 days, I wasn't there.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Katie, what has allowed you to take such a big leap from your freshman year to this season?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, I would say just the confidence. The confidence that my coaches has instilled in me, the work that I put in over the summer, and just the confidence that I have in myself. I place my confidence in Jesus, who gives me my confidence. There's a lot of up and downs in this sport, trying to be consistent through that. So just realizing that I put the work in over the summer, so just, you know...

Q. Getting here this morning and seeing the signage and you're back, but you're back here playing much different roles for the team to get here and then presumably tomorrow. Could you both speak to, did it feel different than when you got to this stage last year, did it feel the same? Could you each speak to what those early impressions were like this morning.

EHIS ETUTE: I mean, I think it kind of just felt the same. You're always kind of just overwhelmed by everything that's going on and how much effort people put into this. So for me it basically felt the same. I didn't think about my role.

KATIE FISO: Yeah, I would say kind of the same. Just a new position, a new role this year. A lot more expectations this year. A lot more responsibilities. Just putting more into that, but other than that just the same thing. Coming here to hoop, have fun, get some Ws.

Q. You both probably dont remember the PAC 12, but

Q. Katie, if I could ask you to elaborate on some of the things that you did to build your confidence.

KATIE FISO: A lot in the weight room. My first year I remember always just getting pushed to the floor. There was a lot of bigger guards in the Big Ten, a lot of bigger players in the Big Ten so adjusting to that was really hard at first. So weight room was definitely the biggest thing for me. Then just being on balance on my finishes, making the right play and making the right read off ball screens has helped me a lot. My coaches helped me a lot during the summer. Off the court the mental part of the game, there's a lot of other things that comes than just basketball but the mental part is really key for me staying consistent, staying not too high, not too low. Realizing that one bad mistake doesn't determine who I am as a basketball player and just relying on the work that I put in.

Q. Katie, being the team's leading scorer but also obviously having so many assists how do you juggle those two roles, what's your mentality about them?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, I feel like being a scorer also helps me find my teammates. When people are collapsing in on me it helps me find my teammates better, helps me find Ehis better. If they're collapsing two on me, Ehis is there for the drop off, the kickback there. So being a scorer definitely helps my passing.



Q. When you guys have been clicking this year playing your best basketball what attributes do you feel like have stood out the most from your team? You know, go back to two Big Ten tournament wins, what did you like about how you guys played that you kind of carry over to the NCAA tournament?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, we say this a lot we have a lot of depth on our team. When we move the ball, when we get to the third side of the floor, when everybody's touching the ball we're a dangerous team because we have so many threats, so many offensive threats and so many defensive threats. So utilizing those threats, finding the hot hand, because some nights it could be me, some nights it could be Ehis, some nights it could be someone who is coming off the bench so utilizing the hot hand, finding the hot hand, and just having fun. We have a lot of fun with this team, so I think that's the biggest thing that carries over.

Q. Ehis, since we're in Austin I got to ask, what kind of player is your sister, since she's going to be coming near next year, and how excited are you to have a sister playing DI ball next year?

EHIS ETUTE: I'm really excited for my sister that she gets to play here. Texas is a great school, and excited for her and the opportunity that she gets. I did call her yesterday and then she was basically she was like, Yeah, I just want you to know, I'm rooting for Texas. And I was like, Damn, like so blood doesn't matter these days anymore? (Laughing).

Q. You get a lot of rebounds, a lot offensive rebounds, what's enabled you to become so good in that area and what's your mindset in terms of when you're trying to get those rebounds off the glass?

EHIS ETUTE: I think most of those rebounds are my own (laughing). So if I wouldn't miss I don't think I would get them. But like just keeping with it and just sticking with it and fighting. Rebounding is all about your mindset and just going for it. So I think that's what gives me the opportunity to get them.

Q. Mia came here to obviously to get to this stage. I wonder if either one of you has an impression of how she's wrapped her head around getting here finally, but then what she meant to you before she got hurt and kind of what her progress has been like back, potentially obviously she could be a key if she can be kind of peak Mia tomorrow and going forward?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, I think this is her first time coming to March Madness, so it's been definitely kind of exciting to

share that experience with her. It's definitely a milestone for her and I'm proud of her. She puts a lot of work in on and off the court and I see it. She means a lot to this team. Both being a leader, both communicating, leading the young guys, and also her play making or her scoring ability off the three and then getting to the foul line has helped us a lot throughout this season. Then when she went out for a little bit it did hurt us a little bit, but like KG always says, it's like an instinct for us, human nature, to have someone step up. And seeing her progress to rehab, doing all the rehab, it's been great. She's slowly making that progress. I think she's great right now. She's been clicking in practice, so hey, that's all I love to see. That's all I ask for her.

Q. You guys were on a team that won an NCAA game in the first round last year. Does that give you guys any more confidence going into this year or is there a certain mindset or attitude like you know what it takes to win a game in the NCAAAs?

KATIE FISO: Yes, it kind of does definitely give us a little bit of confidence to say that we were able to do that and we can still do this again this year. But it's like a whole different team, a lot of seniors left last year. Deja, Philly, Nani, Scottie, and a lot of young guys on this team. So using our youth, I feel like our energy, I feel like it's going to help us get through this first game, so excited. Super excited.

Q. Ehis, feels like you guys have had a number of different players step up for you guys at different points this season. What do you like so much about your depth and how it's kind of shown itself at different times.

EHIS ETUTE: Obviously that's what I like about it that we have so many different players who can go off at any moment, so it's hard for teams to just focus on one because you never know what the other players might do, who might step up. But you can really always rely on our teammates to show up when we need them the most.

Q. Is there a particular hunger for you to participate in a win?

EHIS ETUTE: Because my sister's playing here soon, is that why?

Q. Because you didn't get into -- you guys have gotten this question about the fact that you won a game last year, but you didn't play in that game.

KATIE FISO: Oh.

EHIS ETUTE: Well, damn. Damn.

Q. I wonder if there's a particular hunger for you there to help your team get a W at this stage?

EHIS ETUTE: Obviously we want to win as much as we can. But that doesn't change that because I didn't play last year (laughing). I'm kind of, because, you know, I still want to win. I don't know. You didn't play last year either, did you?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, we both didn't play, but look at us. We staying present. We are here now. But, hey, let's do it, man. Let's do it.

Q. Obviously Amina spent some time here before she transferred to Oregon. What has she meant to your program since she got it Eugene?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, she means a lot to this program, both on and off the court. She's such a ball of light and a ball of energy that like every time we come to practice whenever we see her she's the one player you can't look at or you're going to laugh. She just brings that energy, that focus. She's been at the next level for March Madness, she's been in the later rounds. So she has that type of experience. Just her rebounding ability, her scoring ability, it's great. I'm happy to have her on my side.

Q. Katie, what makes you guys so good when it comes to getting steals and forcing turnovers?

KATIE FISO: Yeah, we hang our hat on our defense. We're very particular in our rotations, our communication. When we're communicating, when we're flying around we're one of the best I feel like defensive teams with our steals our intensity and just our grit, our grittiness. Diving on loose balls and blocking somebody. If it's not an easy layup it's going to be, you're going to feel something. So we're just, we hang our hat on that. So just our intensity on defense is very key to us and our success on this team.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll have coach make an opening statement and then take questions.

KELLY GRAVES: Oh, let's forego that. You got some questions? Let's go.

THE MODERATOR: All right, then we're fine with that as well.

Q. You've been here a lot, but this is your only chance to come here for the first time with this group and kind of show up today, see the signage, see how they

process it all. What were your impressions of -- what went through your mind as you thought about them getting to this stage, but also as they are taking it in, what you see from them.

KELLY GRAVES: Well, we talked about travelling professionally, right. Not that we don't during the regular season, but this is a little different level, the focus got to be a little bit better than sometimes it might be. I'm just really excited for this group. They're a fun group to be around, I've enjoyed practice daily with them and going through this journey with 'em. But they have worked really hard to get where we're at. I don't think this was a given at the start of the year. But we've had a good season and I'm just really happy to see what we can do from here. We're still a relatively young team in this new age where everybody's got grad transfers or fifth or eighth year seniors. We're relying on some young kids and other kids that haven't been a huge, you know, had huge roles. So I'm interested to see how we do, and maybe that lack of experience might help us.

I remember I don't know, seven or eight or nine years ago where we had a bunch of freshmen that made a deep run in this tournament, and they just didn't know any better, so the pressure didn't get to 'em, the moment wasn't too big. I think maybe there could be a little bit of that in this group. At least that's what I'm hoping.

Q. Having spent some days watching Virginia Tech film now what concerns do they post for you and what do you feel like you'll need to do well tomorrow to beat them?

KELLY GRAVES: Well, I did not know much about them. I remember saying when we first got the, you know, we found out who we were playing, I don't get the ACC Network at home. I get everything else. And I am a basketball junkie, I love to watch games. So I was unfamiliar with 'em. But after watching them about eight games, full games, really impressed. I think they played, they execute their roles really well. They have got obviously a couple great playmakers in Wenzel and Baker. Love their games. And then I think the one who kind of stirs the pot and gets them going is No. 3, their point guard, Nelson. I love excellent point guard play and have been very impressed with her. Her ability to catch and shoot the three when she needs it, you know, she does a great job. But she does an awesome job of getting downhill, getting into the paint, creating for others. And Baker and Wenzel, if they're allowed to get catch and shoot threes, they're a difficult team. So I think for us our defense it starts with transition, they're excellent in transition. I don't know how many times the other team scored, they push it, you look at the, you know, the shot clock, when they're making layup

at the other end, 26 seconds. 25 seconds. So they're scoring in four and five seconds on made baskets. So our transition defense has got to be on point.

Then one of our bigger weaknesses this year has been the defensive boards, and they're really good on the offensive glass. So we've got to do a good job there. And then they run so many pick-and-rolls that our ability to, you know, identify the personnel, certain players you got to play for the drive. They're looking to attack off it. And then others like 10 and 1, Wenzel and Baker, they're going to, if you go underneath, boom, they're going to make you pay. So it's going to be quite a riddle that we have to solve and I've never coached against Megan. I know she's a really great young coach in our business, so looking forward to the challenge. But it will be that, definitely a challenge.

Q. Can you talk about Ehis's evolution and how maybe you challenged her and would you guys be here right now if she hadn't evolved the way she did, especially in conference play?

KELLY GRAVES: Well probably not. I'm sure somebody else would have stepped up, but quite frankly she's been a good send. And to see her development, how she's improved certainly in the second half of conference play, just look at the, in our three games in the Big Ten tournament she had three double doubles. And not 11-10 double doubles, she had monster double doubles. She just continues to get better. I think a lot of it is, you know, she's the kind that just, I'm not sure she still believes how good she can be. We try to keep telling her and now she's seeing it more and more and I think she's starting to believe it, and that's why you've seen her numbers go up. But, yeah, there are times when she's the only person we send to the offensive glass, you know. And she still seems to get a whole bunch of 'em. I mean her nose for the ball on rebounds is among the best I've ever seen, certainly ever coached. She's a willing passer, so when we play through her in the low post, you know, because times she's giving up a lot of size to people. She's a willing passer and a smart passer. So, yeah, I just, I'm really proud of her and impressed with how she's improved.

Q. I wanted to ask about Mia, seems like she's a senior, your players are up here talking about this is her first experience in March Madness. What has she meant to your group and what has stood out to her evolution throughout the season?

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, you know, she can be that X factor for us. Quite frankly if she's shooting the three well, we become so much more difficult to defend. She's not a hundred percent right now. She's at a point where she's going to require surgery as soon as the season's over. But

like you said, this is her first NCAA tournament, she's not going to miss this. So she's playing through some pain and doing the best that she can. But I think you're going to see a better Mia in the NCAA tournament than you have in the last few weeks just because she's getting healthier and healthier. She was out for a good bit toward the end of the year. But she's meant a lot. She was our leading scorer for a good portion of the season. I think early on there were games when she carried us, but I'm really happy for her. This has been a long journey for her, third defensive different school and she's never been part of this tournament. So trying to play it up and I think she's going to have a good tournament, I really feel that.

Q. What role has Ari kind of played on the team this season and getting to this moment?

KELLY GRAVES: Ari, can I use the term pest? Menace? She's just one of those players that every team needs that just makes things happen. Sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad, but usually for the good. We keep and track, and I have for 30 years, disruptions, you know, tipping, getting tipped balls, diving on the floor for loose balls, taking charges, those kind of things. We set a goal of 32 as a team a game and we win about 96 percent of our games when we get 32 or more. There have been games when she's had 20 by herself. And she is just one of those players that doesn't always show up in the box score in terms of huge scoring numbers, rebound numbers, or assist numbers, but she's really important to who we are and what we do. It's one of our strengths this year -- I keep looking over here because I heard the voice over here -- but there's nobody actually over there.

THE MODERATOR: There isn't. There isn't.

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, she just makes things happen for us. And when we're at our best we're creating defensively so that we can have transition opportunities on the offensive end. And she allows us to do that. That's when we're most efficient. So great kid, hard worker, nobody spends more time in the gym than she does, she gets a lot of shots up and I'm really happy for her to have this kind of moment to shine on a big stage.

Q. You have so many players on your team who are in new roles this season, whether they're newcomers or returners. At what point in the season do you feel like those roles actually became defined or are they maybe still not fully defined?

KELLY GRAVES: Well I don't know if you ever fully, you know, have the roles defined. Roles change. But I think our players have done a pretty good job of not just, not accepting their roles necessarily, because they can evolve

and change, but executing them. I think our players know who should be getting the shots and when. We always talk in terms of our shot, not your shot or my shot, it's our shot. And we're like any team, we're evolving. But what I'm really proud of in this group is we didn't just go out and plug and play. We didn't go out and get a bunch of transfers to come and play. These are homegrown kids that again didn't play much. You look at Katie and Ehis, the two you already talked with here, they had very small roles last year. Ari, a supportive role. Sophia Bell to some degree. And that's four of our five starters. So I'm proud of that. They have developed, they have gotten better, they figured out what they need to do to get playing time and they're making the most of it. And I can say that on down. Sarah Rambis, among others. So, yeah, good question, thank you.

Q. One player may not be a homegrown player is Amina. She's been with you for two years, but what has she provided you after starting her career here?

KELLY GRAVES: I'm sorry, you said Amina? I just zoned out there for a second. I liken her to a college pro, honestly. She comes every day, works hard. You don't notice her all the time. She just does her job. Last year in this tournament she was huge. Between win that first round game against Vanderbilt, if she doesn't get an offensive rebound on a free throw to seal the game for us. So that's the kind of person she is. Nobody's really going to notice that. We do. She's one of those players that can defend the perimeter, she can defend the inside. Her role because I think Ehis has kind of accepted up and to a bigger role production-wise, her numbers or her numbers and her minutes have been limited a little bit. But she's still really important to us and I think on this kind of stage, having played for Vic and having played for me, we're not the easiest guys to play for, she will be, you know, she's going to be ready for this moment, as she showed last year. So again, we talk about X factors, you know, you need your stars to produce for the most part, but I've been doing this long enough to know that there's always that one or two players that step up in these kind of moments that you may or may not have expected and I think Amina could be one of those. But she's awesome to be around. Great personality. Just easy to coach.

Q. The strong suits of this year's team are they much different than the strong suits of the team that won a game in the NCAA tournament last year?

KELLY GRAVES: Oh, we're completely different. Last year we were really guard heavy and veteran guard heavy. They were all fifth year or more, that was our start being backcourt, and we had a fourth year center as well. So different team. Different team. So I am not exactly sure

what we're going to see. We've played really good basketball this year and we've really played some bad basketball, you know. Sometimes within the same game. But I think when we're good, we're really good team. We're going to be a tough out for anybody. That's the team I hope we see tomorrow and beyond, if that's the case.

Q. A lot of the players we kind of talked about didn't really have a lot of experience the last time you guys went to the NCAA tournament and now they do. Just how was kind of their determination, one, in choose to go stay at Oregon, and not go elsewhere, and two, just their determination in the off-season and through the season to get to this point, how crucial was that in getting to this point?

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, well it's really a close knit group. I think we had nine returners and all nine returned. We didn't lose anybody to the portal, which is not that common anymore. So they were singularly focused on what they wanted to do and we got a taste of the NCAA last year, good shots to the second round. I think this team was hungry, wanting to do even more. So I think right from day one they were committed to each other and committed to the process and committed to kind of getting back here. And we had some ups and downs, but we got here and now we have a chance. And I've never worried about where we're seeded, where we're playing, who we're playing, it's just how we're playing at this point, that's all we can control. So this group's been really, you've been around 'em, you've seen 'em, again, looking up there to the sky. And they are professional and they still have fun, but they work hard and they're really focused.

Q. With Katie, did you expect her to takes a big of a leap as she has this season, and at what point if there was a singular moment did you kind of realize that she was really on that upward trajectory?

KELLY GRAVES: I did. I expected a lot of her right from day one. I think I knew what we had. And she just didn't have a huge opportunity to play last year as a freshman behind those senior guards. She did have a breakout game in our first game in the NCAA tournament and that kind of showed people, hey, this, we might have something here. But I've known Katie, her brother was one of our practice guys when I was at Gonzaga. That's how long I've known that family. So followed her, wing I think he's player in Washington high school history, four state championships at Garfield High School, which is a big city school in Seattle. But she made leaps and, you know, she just grew immensely. I think once she realized, hey, this is kind of my team, you saw how she embraced that role and even though she's just a sophomore, she's the one that's leading the group. She's leading the huddles. Leading

practice, and that's not easy for someone her age. But she's got it in her, she has a lot of the same intangibles as some of the point guards I've coached, like Courtney Vandersloot and Sabrina Ionescu, she's got that same mentality, and I think that's why you're seeing her succeed now. But she's still a work in progress, she's got a long ways to go and she's going to continue to get better and better. But she's going to have a great pro future I think.

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