

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Oregon State vs Notre Dame

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Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

Oregon State Beavers
Coach Scott Rueck
AJ Marotte

Talia von Oelhoffen

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, this group has just adapted to every single thing that's been thrown at them. We've got a freshman point guard. We've got two freshmen point guards. We've got a freshman that's a significant player coming off the bench. We've got a team that didn't make the postseason a year ago that's here now.

Nothing has fazed this group. They just play the game. Every time the lights have gotten brighter, it's just natural, and it's this natural progression.

We've been in big moments all year. I think one of the odd moments that this team was a part of was Tara Day at Stanford. She set the wins record against us that day on a day that felt like -- I don't know, the lights were definitely bright that day. That game had so much hype around it. This team just locked in, and we didn't win, but we played well that day.

It's just been a progression of that all year.

This one, focus on the fundamentals, focus on communication, and let's be us out here. That hasn't been an issue for this group. I'm just looking forward to more of the same.

Q. In regard to Dom, you've played her quite a bit this season, but lately in the postseason she's averaging double figures and putting up big numbers. Could you discuss her progress throughout the season, how you've fed her into this lineup to get her to this point.

SCOTT RUECK: Well, she's earned it. Dom Paurová is just a dynamic guard. She plays multiple positions, and that's one of the things that has allowed her to play such a big role for us, especially as the year has progressed.

With Dom, she plays so aggressive. And then you're seeing such a different type of game night after night. And in our conference you see a lot of different styles, and it's a defensive-oriented conference. And because of that, you're schemed every night.

And people have gotten familiar with our game, and they've

Q. The NCAA has talked about how important it is to have first and second rounds hosted by the top four seeds to get crowds, and then they send you guys across the country to Albany and they send UConn across the country to Oregon. I was wondering your thoughts on whether it would be better to keep top seeds closer to home during these rounds?

SCOTT RUECK: It's a fair question. I mean, that's beyond my thinking at this moment. I think it makes sense to be at home for the first two. I do. I get that. I think the top 16, A, you've earned it; B, you're guaranteed a great environment to play in.

We've been on both sides of it. We played at Tennessee in 2018 as a 6 seed, created a great opportunity for us, and certainly we've been home many times.

I think our résumé earned that, and we've benefitted from that most times.

Once you get to this round, it's a national tournament, and so I think you go where they send you, and I don't think regionality matters any longer once you get to the 16 and beyond.

Q. You guys are coming off of setting a postseason attendance record for your program. Now you do come here to a neutral site. What adjustment do you guys need to make in that, and what do you tell your players about the jump that you are making in that regard?



taken certain things away from her that might be a natural thing for her to do, and she's really had to think at a different level and understand and read at a different level.

And now Dom, the game has just slowed down for her. So you've got that aggressive mindset, that just dynamic skill set and ability, and now experience to go with it. She's just more and more valuable game after game.

It's been hard to keep her off the floor, to be honest.

Q. I'm guessing you'd be in favor of keeping the tournament as it is for the first two rounds, having the top 16 host?

SCOTT RUECK: I'm in favor of that.

Q. The second one is you've been part of the Pac-12 forever. You've known from the inside, how great it actually is on the national stage. Is there any group text between all the coaches saying let's keep going or something of that nature?

SCOTT RUECK: There's always been a lot of encouragement throughout, and Tara has set the tone for that. I think back to my first day on the job, it was literally my first week on the job, July 2010, I show up in Chicago to recruit not knowing what I'm doing, not even having an assistant yet. I just felt like I should be there.

I didn't know Tara from anyone. I just knew her as this legend at Stanford, and I was a D-III guy up the road. And she came up to me and welcomed me. And that's what I know she does for everyone. She made me and everyone feel like you're a part of the group and we're all in this together, fighting together from the West Coast, which is -- there is something to that.

Because of that, we've always supported each other, and there's been a very healthy respect amongst all of us. And to watch all of our programs rise, and now there's so much consistency within the conference, that's what's made it so good.

We've kept coaches. We have excellent coaches. They recruit to who they are, and now we've had cultures, 12 cultures that are tight and have won at a high level, and so many of us have. So we're so prepared once we get to this point that there is that camaraderie of respect.

I know that will continue. There is a group text and a thread, and Tara sent out a really nice text congratulating everyone and wishing everyone the best, and it's really appreciated. Of course we all want to beat each other, but at the same time there's a lot of respect, and it's been a joy

to be a part of.

Q. When you think about the growth of the sport and what is needed to move it forward, how important are those nationally televised games happening throughout the year on ABC, ESPN, FOX, making sure teams are put on those platforms throughout the year and put in front of people's eyes?

SCOTT RUECK: I think we're seeing it. I think we're seeing exactly the benefit of eyes on our sport.

I've enjoyed -- this is my 28th year doing this, 14 D-III, 14 here now. And I have always enjoyed helping someone who has not respected our sport learn to. And it takes usually one game. Just give it a chance, one game. And I always said that: Give us a chance, come to one game. But I'll warn you, you're going to get hooked, and you won't stop coming.

That's what's happened at both stops for me.

Now with so much more publicity given to our sport, absolutely earned, but finally given, everybody is talking about our sport. Everybody. People say, I love watching women's basketball more than men's. How many times I've heard that over my career? A lot. And it's from usually men who are shocked at how much they enjoy it. That has been a secret passion of mine that's not a secret any longer that I just love.

I love that because I benefitted from having a little sister that played at a high level, and I learned to respect a female athlete at age 20 and to look at her and go, man, I never -- I played, and I never played with anybody that cared more than my sister did or played harder than my sister did. And she became an All-American. That helped open my eyes at a young age.

Well, now everybody is seeing it. How many guys can do what Caitlin does? Of course. That's the obvious example right now.

For me, the more national publicity, the better. I think that is the key, and it's proving -- we don't have to be anything we're not. That's the other thing that I think people need to know. We don't need to be another sport or a version of another sport. We need to be us and tell our stories.

And so the more national news, the more national publicity, the more national eyes, the better our stories are because there's 360 great stories. They are, if they just were told. There's not four, I know that. We tend to latch on to four. But there's not four, it's a lot. It's just getting it out there. So the more, the better.

Q. Following up on that, what's the game you would suggest someone watch of you guys to hook a prospective fan to get them engaged with Oregon State? What would be the game you would send in that text?

SCOTT RUECK: Every single one, man. Just come out. Just give us a chance. It doesn't matter.

A specific game, that depends on the year for sure. I would always have said come out to watch us play Oregon, of course. It's just such a crazy atmosphere every time and electricity in the building.

But I really mean that when I say that. You could come to our first game against whoever it is, and you will see what I'm talking about. It's not just basketball. There's something inspiring about watching a group play and play for each other, and that's what our sport has when it's done right. When it's done well, that's the environment that's created. It's so hard to find that in life.

I remind our team of that. What you're a part of right now, it's going to be difficult for you to replicate this in your life. It is so special, and it's so inspiring, and that's the vibe and that's the feeling. It's just like -- like I say, practice is a three-hour vacation. You're where you want to be. You're with the people you want to be. You're doing what you love. I mean, that's vacation.

Well, that's practice for us. That's what I do my best to create. Well, that's Gill Coliseum when we play. It's a three-hour, two-to-three-hour just out-of-life -- it's a vacation. That's why we're supported like we are in Corvallis and beyond. That's what you would see day one no matter the opponent.

Q. Talking with the general manager here of the arena, they said they're expecting this to be the biggest NCAA event they've ever had, not only just here in terms of the arena but also economic impact throughout the city and the area here in Albany. What does that say about the strides the women's game has made to bring in that kind of attention?

SCOTT RUECK: That's beautiful. I mean, that's what we're all doing this for. It's bigger than us. It's people being aware of what's going on, people being aware of what -- I don't know. That just makes me happy to hear. That's what it should be. That's what these athletes deserve. That's what the community deserves. It's like a big party. It's just a big party around four groups of people or eight groups of people doing things at the very highest level.

Credit to all of those who are getting the word out and the opportunity to have the awareness raised.

Q. I want to ask you a question about a matchup. Obviously you've played some terrific freshmen, you have some great freshmen. With what Hannah Hidalgo has done for Notre Dame, what kind of challenge does she present when it comes to matching up against her?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, such a dynamic player. She impacts the game in so many ways. Her pace and her speed is special. Her skill set is special. Her ability to score is special, and her ability to disrupt defensively is special.

She's gotten the keys to the team. She plays with that confidence and that swagger that she has, the green light. So give Niele a ton of credit for building her up like that.

We've seen players like Sherrod from Colorado. I say they're somewhat similar in their overall impact and their ability to just go make plays even outside of the system maybe at the time.

But the pace is similar to that, that she plays with on both ends. She is obviously a unique talent but somewhat similar in pace to some others that we've seen, and we know those are real challenges. She's dynamic, and we're going to have to slow her down. You don't stop her, but we're going to need to disrupt her as much as we can.

Q. Anyone who's watched Pac-12 women's basketball over the last few years but especially this regular season not surprised to see five teams in the Sweet 16, but is it bittersweet in the last year of the league as it's currently constructed to have this type of success?

SCOTT RUECK: I mean, to me it's inevitable. I'm not surprised. It would be disappointing if it was different, honestly, for us to end in the weird -- to me it's still surreal, being a West Coaster my whole life and to think that there's no longer a Pac anything -- I think when I was born it was the 8, then I broke in -- I lived as a student in the 10, and then as a coach I think my first year in the Pac-10 and then 12. It's just always been a thing.

It's still, I would say, surreal.

For us to finish in our sport the way that we have is perfect. It's just perfect. National respect was what we always fought for. That's what Tara wanted. From day one, it was we've got to do this and we've got to do this and we've got to schedule right and we've got to do these things, as we

build, and all those things have happened.

I'm really proud of everyone, and of course sad, but that's life. Life changes. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be a part of it and excited to support everyone as we go forward.

Q. Your coach was talking a little bit about the defensive play that you guys are used to in your league. I wanted to ask you guys how has that prepared you for a team like Notre Dame and their defense and secondly prepared you for Hannah Hidalgo, who was mentioning Sherrod who's a similar type player? So how does what you've been through this year prepare you for her?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think just our league scouts so heavy, and it's very personnel based. So we're used to teams kind of keying in on us and taking away maybe what we want to do. So being able to go to second and third options and having counters to different looks that are thrown at us.

And then obviously, like you mentioned, Hidalgo, very similar to Sherrod, and having that very quick guard that likes to get steals and come out of help. Players like that have prepared us for her.

But I think there's just so many different types of defenses and different dynamics in the Pac-12 that we've kind of seen it all at this point. So, yeah, that's definitely prepared us for this tournament, and going to be huge for us going forward.

AJ MAROTTE: We take a lot of pride in our defense. We work super hard on it. And not a lot of teams can say they love defense, but I feel like all of us can.

Q. Your coach was just talking about still feeling surreal that this is it for the Pac-12, and I'm wondering as players, knowing that you're a part of a team and a league in the final season, whether you've found any extra special significance in knowing that you guys have been a part of this, especially in the last one?

AJ MAROTTE: It definitely is a lot more meaningful, wanting to go this far and represent the Pac-12 for the last go-around. We haven't really thought about it much or talked about it much, but it's definitely in the back of our heads to represent as best we can for the last season.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think you don't want it to be too much of a distraction, so we haven't had a ton of conversations about it. Our mindset was kind of just we're playing for a Pac-12 championship this year, and that's all

we know, that's all we can focus on, and obviously figure more stuff out after the season.

But, yeah, it's definitely sad to see, especially with how well our conference is doing and how strong and powerful the women's basketball conference is.

I also don't think I've processed it. I think it's super surreal at this point, and it'll probably hit me a little bit more in the off-season just going forward seeing all the changes.

But, yeah, I don't think it's something we've allowed to kind of derail our goals, and we've just stayed focused on what we can control.

Q. I saw this is your first game playing this far on the East Coast outside of the western time zone. How have you acclimated to the time change and what are your thoughts on Albany?

AJ MAROTTE: I think the two of us are the only ones on the team that played this far. We got here yesterday. So just resting up and taking our time, obviously, with practice. But when we're not practicing, we're just resting and taking care of our bodies.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: We got here Tuesday, so we had the extra night. We definitely slept in a little bit Wednesday morning. But I think at this point we're all adjusted and it feels normal now. But, yeah, New York is great so far.

Q. Obviously you guys earned the first two games at home. The NCAA has made a big deal about earning that right and having those big crowds. And then all of a sudden there's a region in Portland, and they send you to Albany and they send UConn out to Oregon. Is that something that disappoints you, or do you like the idea of getting these kind of trips for the team as a bonding experience? How do you feel about having to travel this far when there's a super regional right next door?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think we understand. I think it just came down to Pac-12 schools, separating us into the regionals. It made sense. It's definitely disappointing not to be in Portland because for me I'm from Washington so that's driving distance for my family, and then obviously our fans getting the opportunity to watch us for a few more games. Of course we'd love to be there, but we understand why we're over here, and we're going to make the most of it, and we're excited to keep playing.

We've moved on from that, controlling what we can control, and we're happy to be here.

Q. I noticed you had heart written on your sleeve. I wasn't there, so if you can just talk about why you decided to do that and also if you have plans to keep doing that now in this round.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I've been doing it for I don't know how many games, but it's just how I try to play, heart on my sleeve. And then I have a lot of my loved ones wrote little messages on there for me, so just a reminder of why I play, who I play for. And I just like having it on my arm, and they're always with me. It means a lot to me.

Q. Can you say what those messages are and do you have a new one for tomorrow that has new messages? How does that work?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: No, I don't -- I think we're in black tomorrow, so I don't have a black one. I have one that says heart on it but not the messages. I think my mom just wrote, Mama loves you, and then my grandparents wrote a couple, and then two of my best friends just wrote, Always with you, things like that. So, yeah, it means a lot to me.

Q. Since you guys are far away from home, how many of your family members are going to be traveling? Or I don't know if the team has talked about that in terms of how many are going to be able to make the trip?

AJ MAROTTE: My parents are coming in tonight actually. I think a lot of our team's parents are coming. They're all super supportive. Even when our own parents can't come, it's like the rest of our family is coming when other people's parents come. So we're really excited to have that support.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think probably a little more than half, like seven or eight of us, I want to say, have just parents coming. It's definitely going to travel well over here.

Q. Is there a team in the Pac-12 that Notre Dame reminds you of, and what worries you most about this Notre Dame team?

AJ MAROTTE: We didn't really have a team that we based them off or said that we saw similarities with, but there's definitely individuals on the team that remind us, like Sherrod and things like that. But not anyone we've really seen, but it's a team we match up with super well, so it's going to be good either way.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think if we had to pick one, maybe UCLA, just their 4's ability to shoot and stretch the

floor, and then skilled play makers, shooters kind of everywhere. And then obviously they have a point guard that can get up and pressure similar to UCLA's guards. That might be the closest comparison I can think of, but every team is different.

Like I said, we've seen a lot of different looks in the Pac-12 and in different individual players that have prepared us well for this.

Q. Knowing that Notre Dame does have a short bench and they essentially have a six-player rotation, I'm curious in terms of trying to get them into foul trouble that could potentially give you an advantage. Without giving away too much of the game plan, does it seem like that could be something as a strategy going into the game?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, it's definitely something you have to take into account. Obviously they lost their starting center. With the inside presence that we have, it'll be interesting to see how they adjust to -- Raegan Beers is hard to guard without fouling, so how they'll adjust to that post presence and maybe staying in that zone or doubling.

It'll be interesting to see what they do, and then we'll just adjust and play off that. But it's definitely a little bit of an advantage if that were to happen or they were to get in foul trouble.

But not focusing too much on that, obviously.

Q. Talk about what Coach Rueck has meant to you, how he has helped develop you off the court and on the court, as well?

AJ MAROTTE: Well, he's helped me mature a lot as a player. We focus on the defensive things a lot, and that's something I didn't really make a part of my identity as a basketball player, but I definitely do now, and just focusing on the little things that I didn't really think about when I was younger. He's helped a lot with that.

Outside of basketball, I've definitely grown into my skin more as a person, and I think I'm a little more outgoing, and I give a lot of credit to them for that.

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think Coach Rueck does a great job at keeping the game. He's a teacher at heart, so I think both defensively and offensively just kind of breaking the game down for all of us and teaching us reads, and then defensively just angles and how to guard certain players and playing tendencies and things like that.

He's an amazing teacher, and that's why all of his teams

have been so successful, and our team this year has really embraced that and grown in so many ways because of that.

I think off the court just he does a really great job emphasizing just being a role model and being -- really engaging our fan base and going into the community. Our team does a lot of community service and things like that, and we're very connected with our fans and just understanding the platform that we have, especially with young girls looking up to us.

Yeah, we all take that super seriously, and he does a great job incorporating that into our culture of our team. And so I think that's definitely helped me kind of zoom out a little bit and just realize why we're doing this, what we're doing this for, the platform that I have, and that's really helped me grow as a person.

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