

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Ohio State vs Texas

Thursday, March 24, 2022

Spokane, Washington, USA

Veterans Memorial Arena

**Ohio State Buckeyes**

**Kevin McGuff**

**Rikki Harris**

**Kateri Poole**

**Rebeka Mikulasikova**

Sweet 16 Media Conference



we tried to focus on, hey, let's do some things that will allow us to be the best version of ourselves. Then we did sprinkle in obviously things that make Texas unique. They're one of the best defensive teams in the country, one of the best rebounding teams in the country. We did some work in those areas to try to prepare us for the game.

**Q. A win tomorrow would be a big point for the program because you guys haven't been past the Sweet 16 since '93. Have you thought about that at all this week? How much has that been in the back of your mind as a steppingstone?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: I mean, it would obviously be a huge milestone. We have a very passionate fan base who takes a lot of pride in our program. For them I think it would be a huge deal. Certainly then for our players, what we're trying to accomplish, who we're trying to be as a program. That would be an obvious next step for us.

**Q. If you could talk about Texas, maybe who you played that reminds you of them or doesn't, some of the challenges for you all.**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Like I said, they're one of the best defensive teams in the country. What makes them unique, their ball pressure, their ability to deny passing lanes, disrupt offenses, makes them arguably the best defensive team in the country.

The scary part about that is they're as good as anyone in the country at taking live ball turnovers and turning them into layups. Two huge things that stand out to me is we're going to have to take care of the ball, not turn the ball over. That will be a stat to look at at the end of the game to see where we're at with that. The other one is just our ability to keep them off the glass. They're a very physical, athletic team that can really do some damage on the offensive boards.

**Q. Taylor has had quite the tour of colleges over her years. When she went into the portal last year, what did you remember about her from when she played at Maryland? What did you think she'd be able to do to help your team?**

THE MODERATOR: Coach, opening statement for us?

KEVIN MCGUFF: We can go straight to questions.

THE MODERATOR: Open up for questions in the room, please.

**Q. Kevin, what have the last 48 hours been like? You get home wee hours Tuesday morning, quick turnaround. You're here now. What is the focus as you're here now?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, obviously quick turnaround. We got back from Baton Rouge late, late Monday, early Tuesday. Got to the house at 3:15 or so. We took Tuesday off so we could get some rest, the kids could get everything together.

Had a pretty good practice yesterday. Hopped on the plane and came out here.

It's a quick turnaround but I don't really mind it. I don't really want to be sitting around all week thinking about the game. Let's get up here, let's get prepared and let's play.

**Q. With that, just having one practice between last game and this game, what was the biggest focus for your team?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: With the limited amount of preparation,



KEVIN MCGUFF: I'll start with I've told her several times, it's about time she got this right (laughter).

In all seriousness, one of the things, first of all, she's a terrific player. Obviously her ability to score from the three-point line. I think she's added some things to her game off the dribble, and so forth, has just been huge for us.

I think also her experience at playing at a high level when she came into our program. We don't have many people that have played in the NCAA tournament. She's been able to really lead, especially when we've gotten her to postseason, just kind of espouse some of her wisdom, what it takes to be successful at this point in the NCAA tournament.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

KEVIN MCGUFF: I did. Unsuccessfully, but yes (smiling).

**Q. Last game against LSU, you have Khayla Pointer, now going up against Rori Harmon. What do you tell your guards about going up against the Big 12 freshman of the year? What is your message to them? Second question, on the defensive side, you mentioned their baseline-to-baseline really hard pressure on defense. What is your message to the players on that?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: With Rori, she's had an incredible season. Just a very special player. She presents a lot of challenges for us. I think the first one is to try to just get her a little bit under control in transition. When she gets going, if she gets lanes to the basket, she's going to get there and finish.

Just in general, too, I don't think with one person you're going to say, hey, she's going to guard Rori and shut her down. We've got to really, really be heavy, and just helping each other keep her away from the basket. When she gets going downhill, she's just really tough to stop. It's going to have to be a collective effort to try to keep her away from the rim.

With their defense, the biggest thing for us is to stay poised and stay organized. LSU turned the heat up when we had a lead on them the other day. We had a little bit of difficulties, but I think for the most part Jacy, Taylor, and Braxtin just had the poise and organization that was needed to keep our team under control and make sure we didn't turn the ball over.

**Q. When you've already had a big upset like you just**

**did to beat a No. 3 seed, LSU, in their home court, how much do you see that build confidence in your team that now you have a chance to go get another upset or two this weekend?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I think that's a great point. With the win at LSU, in such a tough environment, it really did, I think, raise the level of confidence for our players.

I think we had a strong belief going in that we could win, but then to actually do it, and to play very well. We played one of our best basketball games at the right time. Hopefully that gives them confidence as we prepare for this very, very talented and well-coached Texas team.

**Q. Obviously they're going to double-team Mikesell and also Taylor. What is the game plan in case things switch up on you?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, like always, Jacy and Taylor are going to garner a lot of attention from Texas, how they prepare for us. So it will need to be a team effort. They're going to have to obviously play well and score for us to have a chance to win. It's going to have to be more of a team effort versus Texas than maybe it has been in some other games.

**Q. Looking at the big picture of your time at Ohio State, how would you compare this team to other teams, '17 and '16, that were also Sweet 16 teams?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I would tell you, and I say this with great reverence to this team, this has been one of the most enjoyable seasons I've ever had in 20 years as a head coach, I don't know this from top to bottom is as talented as some of the teams we've had in the past. But this is the best chemistry that we've had with a team that I've had a chance to coach at Ohio State.

**Q. Like we sort of have been talking about obviously with the upset, some of the teams that have had a lot more national recognition are already out of the running. Maybe for an audience that hasn't seen Ohio State play yet, what would you consider some of your trademarks, priorities?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: I think a big part of our identity is our offensive pace, the pace that we play at to try to generate offense, how fast we are up the court.

Our spacing, we have a little bit of a unique style where we play a lot of 5-out basketball where most people are more traditional with the post players around the basket. We've recruited to that to be able to play that way.



We also press every game. Sometimes it's the whole time, sometimes it's just part of the time in how it goes. Those would be the things that make us a little bit different than some of the other teams you might watch.

**Q. Have you and Vic coached against each other at any of your previous stops?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: No, not with Vic as the head coach. We have not, no.

**Q. Is that unique at this point in the tournament, to be going up against someone you've never had to game plan against?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, it is a little bit unique. I've known Vic for almost 25 years, more than 25 years I've known him and consider him a good friend. He's done an incredible job at two programs now, Mississippi State and Texas. He's a terrific coach. But I've never actually never coached against him.

I have a former player, April Phillips, who's on his staff as an assistant coach, played for me at Xavier. A lot of familiar connections but we've never coached against each other.

**Q. For those who saw your system when you were coaching at Washington, how is that system of playing 5-out, being more guard oriented, evolved?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: We started there. We were running the dribble-drive, playing very fast, scoring a lot of points. It was a four around one up-tempo style. We've evolved a little bit in that we've specifically recruited post players that could play away from the basket. Kind of modeled it after what they do in the NBA you see a lot. I've had conversations and Zoom calls with NBA coaches to garner ideas. We've done our own research.

We were playing fast at Washington. It was a little more four around one. We've kind of shifted to a 5-out motion offense here at Ohio State in the last couple years, I should say.

**Q. Do you feel as a coach there aren't as many good, traditional back to the basket players anymore? Is this where the game is evolving? Do you just not like players in the paint?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: It's a couple reasons. One, that's part of it. You make recruiting calls nowadays, every post player wants to be a guard. It's like, okay, let's quit fighting it, let's just do it. Let's form a system that we can accommodate

that. That's part of it.

I also think that if we do it, if we're doing it right, it can be more efficient. Take, for example, like Texas. If their post players are allowed to hang around the basket all the time, every time we drive it in, they're contesting shots at the rim. Now if we can bring them away from the basket a little bit, it allows us to get to the rim and be a little more effective.

**Q. You mentioned the chemistry on this team. Seems like you have had really good balance of having two great scorers, but also getting a lot of contributions from others. Do you feel that, maybe this team has a better balance than teams you've had in the past?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, I think you're right. I mentioned the chemistry. But I think the next step to the whole thing, kind of where you're going with this, kind of role definition. We know Taylor and Jacy are going to get a lot of shots, but everybody is fine with that. Everybody else shows up in a way to contribute. We have been significantly more kind of outside of those two, we've had a lot of balance and a lot of contribution from a lot of people throughout the year.

**Q. I've had the privilege of covering you all season. One of the things you have talked about is rebounding. I know that's going to be a key contribution to winning when you play Texas. I had an opportunity to go to Pittsburgh and watch the men. When that key came into the game, rebounding was one of the key contributions to the way they played in the second half. Talk about the defensive mindset, offensive and defensive mindset, when it comes to rebounding.**

KEVIN MCGUFF: That's going to be a huge thing for us. Texas is incredibly athletic, physical, and aggressive on the boards. When we were in Louisiana, I said -- excuse my French because we were down there, French is okay -- I think I can say it in the Northwest, we're going to have to fight like hell on every possession to get the ball back if we want to win on Friday.

**Q. I'm fascinated by the 5-out thing. I'm guessing you at least at this point watched a little bit of film on Stanford. Do you think a player like Haley Jones is where the game is moving?**

KEVIN MCGUFF: Yeah, and Cameron Brink as well. They're so skilled, versatile.

When I say 5-out, we start like that, and we will roll our post players to the basket at times. We certainly get the ball around the basket. Instead of just running down and going like that, getting in a wrestling match from the first

seconds of the possession, we start them on the perimeter, we make the other team's post players play out there. We may cut them, screen them, roll to the basket. But specifically to Stanford's players, they are, yeah, I think where the game is going.

I think what young people aspire to be is versatile players that can play anywhere on the court. Obviously Stanford does as good a job as anybody in the country of moving them around, executing, to put them in a position to be successful.

THE MODERATOR: We'll have the student-athletes join us.

We're ready to go. Welcome our student-athletes here.

**Q. Rebeka and Kateri, you talked to family and friends back home. Your success in this tournament against LSU, what is the feedback you're getting from them? Kateri, it's been an up-and-down year in terms of playing time for you. After your injury you've come back and built a very good role for this team. Take me through that.**

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: So I talk to my family and my friends at home, like, every day. It's like a big deal for them to get to Sweet 16.

I watched the game with my parents like few hours later when we got home because of the time change. They were super excited. It's like a big deal.

Yeah, I'm celebrating with them. They're happy for me, so...

KATERI POOLE: I think the main thing is being supportive of my teammates, what we're able and can accomplish. No matter what, the minutes that you do get, be your best, show what you can do, and also help your teammates as well. That's just been my mentality throughout the whole year.

**Q. Coach was in here talking about how Taylor, one thing she's brought this year, she's played in the NCAA tournament, has big-game experience. Has she talked about that over the last couple weeks, helped anyone get to know what it would be like? How has that helped your team?**

RIKKI HARRIS: Her experience helps her and helps us, of course. She hasn't really talked about the past. We just focus on us, what's going on now. Definitely it helps having her on the court. She knows what she's doing. But we just focus on now and our team.

**Q. Coach talked about how you really only had that one practice between your game Monday and coming into today. What was the biggest focus for you guys coming off the big win against LSU for that practice to get ready for this week?**

KATERI POOLE: I think the main thing was just staying focused, just playing our game. If anybody has questions, we can just reach out, throw out a text. It's not that hard. I think everybody is on the same page, wants it together for each other. Just locking in, being able to work for each other, create that unity is what means the most to us right now.

RIKKI HARRIS: He made it clear we're not done. That win was great, but we're still here to play.

**Q. Ohio State hasn't gone past the Sweet 16 since 1993. Is that something you were aware of? What would it mean for you to get past that point?**

RIKKI HARRIS: I'm pretty sure we didn't know that (laughter). No, we just want to win and play. At this point we're coming in as the underdogs in most of our games right now. Just playing hard and playing together, no chip on our shoulders, we just want to win.

**Q. Obviously at LSU you were playing in a pretty hostile environment. Does it feel good to be at a neutral site after that or did that fuel you a little bit?**

KATERI POOLE: I'm over here itching for that question because I'm used to that environment (smiling).

You know, I'm used to the environment in New York, so it's pretty lively. Just having my teammates know my energy is there. They don't really get that side from me. I think being able to see that from everybody, from the coaching staff to the last player on the bench, everybody was locked in for that game.

I think everybody was ready for that atmosphere. When we got off the bus, it was crazy. I think we just bought into it and did what we did.

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah.

**Q. To beat LSU on their home court and already get one upset in this tournament, how much more confidence does that give you going into this weekend to feel like you can get another upset or two?**

RIKKI HARRIS: I would say, I mean, it's good. We weren't looking at it as an upset. We think we're one of the best



teams in the NCAA, so...

It just was a good win for us. We just got to play hard and keep going.

**Q. Rikki, I noticed before the game against LSU, you were talking to Khayla Pointer, saying something to her. You looked pretty fired up, rubbing your hands together. For everybody, you're playing now against Big 12 tournament champions. What do you see from them and where do you think your strengths can kind of outweigh theirs?**

RIKKI HARRIS: Before that game I was singing to the music. I heard the whistle sound, Let's go. Going into this game against Texas, it's just another game. They're a good team, but we're a good team. It's just going to come down to the heart, who wants it more.

KATERI POOLE: I think March is for everybody. The person that comes out from the beginning, coming off the plane, is the person that takes it all. I think we're a championship team, a national championship team. Any given day is for anybody. But we're going to come out and work hard.

**Q. Rebeka, during the regular season you had 17 points against Iowa. In big games, the one against LSU you had 12 points. When you step up like that, the team has a better chemistry, able to make things happen. What is the feeling in the locker room when you are all coming together to help each other in terms of not just offensive, but defensive mindset?**

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: So both games, Iowa and LSU, I think I helped the team. I hit some good shots, which helped. Just like the support from my teammates when they believe me, when they pass me the ball, I think that's like the best feeling when I know that they believe I can make it, then I believe in myself.

The feeling, like, in the locker room and on the court, it's huge. I feel like we have great chemistry, so that helps.

**Q. Rebeka, coach was in here talking about the 5-out offense you guys run. He said part of it there aren't a lot of true post players left in the game, that every post player wants to be a guard secretly. When he recruited you, is that something you talked about? You're the tallest player on the roster but I think you've attempted 72 threes this season. Do you think of yourself as a guard or secretly want to be a guard?**

REBEKA MIKULASIKOVA: I don't really think I was thinking about that that way, that I'm secretly a guard. I

don't think so.

I just feel like, especially here in U.S., there's not that many post players that shoot the ball. They're used to being in the paint, being physical. So I feel like that's what I brought for this team, to be able to step outside, shoot the ball.

But, yeah, I don't know. I don't think I'm secretly a guard. I'm still a post player.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

KATERI POOLE: She brings the ball up the court a couple times.

RIKKI HARRIS: I'm not going to lie. She hit us with one of these moves in practice. I'm like from now on she's the point guard.

KATERI POOLE: I don't like guarding Rebeka in practice. It's not fun.

**Q. Rikki, coach said before you guys have better chemistry than he's seen in past years, a better balance. As someone who has been here for a couple years, is that something you see this year, that this team just has a better chemistry than you've had in the past?**

RIKKI HARRIS: Yeah, we definitely have a better chemistry. We play for each other. That's the big change. I know in past years we played for each other but not everyone did.

Everybody on this team wants to see everybody else succeed. I think bringing out the Dub Chain helped with that. We don't really care who win it. Everybody who plays hard, everybody deserves it. Know that you have people that want you to succeed and do well is a great feeling that makes the team better.

**Q. Texas brings a lot of pressure with their defense. They press a lot. The fact that you have faced that in practice, has that helped some? What have you seen on film the way Texas can get after teams and force turnovers?**

RIKKI HARRIS: I mean, it was good to see in practice, I think that's good for them. But we're a good defensive team, too. I guess it's just going to be a defensive game. Offense will come for both teams, we'll score. I guess it's just going to be who is willing to make that extra play on defense, go after that loose ball, dive on the ground. I know we're ready to do that all game. So whoever can last the longest.

**Q. A lot of people are not expecting the Buckeyes to advance. What you have been able to do as a team is impeccable and impressive. What is the biggest strength you have that you want to let the nation know that you are a team that has the power to advance?**

KATERI POOLE: Well, the Buckeyes are here now. All that advancing and bracket stuff is done with. I believe that our mentality is stronger than any other team in the NCAA. Like we said, we're very, very tough on each other and want everybody to succeed. That oneness and unity plays a huge role in it. We're locked in together, nobody can stop us but ourselves. I think we're good with that one.

RIKKI HARRIS: I say we're good at accepting pressure. As long as we stick together throughout the whole thing, we're good. That's all. We just stay together. A lot of teams, when we played them, they bring their best game against us. We just know, no matter what, if we stay together, we're going to be good.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you to our student-athletes for joining us.

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