

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Oklahoma vs UConn

Friday, March 28, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

Oklahoma Sooners
Jennie Baranczyk
Payton Verhulst
Skylar Vann
Raegan Beers

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. We'll start with questions for Coach.

Q. I know we talked a lot about Skylar's process this year and everything that she's been through. I wanted to ask you about the last month or so of the season, the way that she's adjusted to that and seemingly sort of found a groove that had been missing for a lot of the year. What have you noticed about that?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, sometimes when you start watching really good teams grow, you kind of forget that it's a process, and especially great players. And you could see Skylar throughout the year grow, struggle, fall, get up, have a good game, manage expectations, try to manage really good players around her. I thought the most impressive thing was a couple games ago, and we're in the postgame press conference, and she's asked about having a disappointing year, and I thought her response was phenomenal where she just said, This is actually my favorite year because I've grown the most. Sometimes when you face adversity, you build resilience.

We don't always honor that. And I think Sky's honored it, and I think she's stayed in it. I think she doesn't believe when people tell her she's great and she doesn't believe when people tell her she's not. And I think that's really what she's been able to do. She's been a phenomenally leader. She's one of my all-time favorite people to coach because she stays present, she looks in the mirror, she



doesn't blame anybody.

But it's been so fun to be able to see her have fun and play with this immense joy. And she wants other people around her to be great. I think that's really the trademark of really what we're trying to teach young people, and in coaching, that's our job is to make sure that these young people can see their own greatness, but also greatness of other people, and that's Skylar.

Q. Being able to have Raegan with your program this year, what has she meant to this team? What has she meant to just be able to coach both on and off the floor? And what do you feel like her ceiling is as she continues to get comfortable with you-all and the program?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, we know her ceiling. She's not even close. She's got so much potential. I love the way that she's really come into our program. She's one of the world's best people. She frequents Hobby Lobby, right? And she wants to make arts and crafts and meaningful gifts for her teammates. You don't always get to see that from a center who is pretty aggressive, who is physical, but off the floor she's just the most amazing person.

Honestly, it's taken us a little bit because of that. I think it's taken her a little bit to come into a team and really be assertive. I think transferring's hard, especially when there were unique circumstances as to why she did. She's been so open-minded. She picked a team and a program that's a completely different style, but she picked it for reasons because she really just liked the players when she came on the visit. I think that's phenomenal too. Obviously, she's really elevated our level of play. Sahara Williams one time talked about -- and I'm paraphrasing her quote, but she mentioned something about when she knew that Raegan came, it elevated a level of attention to our program, it elevated a level of play, and so she said, I got to get better.

And I think that's what our team sees, is that everybody wants to elevate the level of our play, everybody wants to get better, and I think Raegan's been a huge part of that

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without even knowing that she was a huge part of that.

Q. A follow-up to that question. When you're recruiting someone out of the transfer portal, you don't get the four years that maybe you would get with them when they're a high schooler. Was there anything that maybe you didn't realize during the recruiting process with her in that time period from Oregon State to Oklahoma that once she locked into the team on the floor, you're like, Oh, she actually unlocks this with our team or she changes this about our team? And I'm sure you imagined her raising the level, but maybe there's -- are there certain things that you found unexpected that she's changed about the team or how you're able to do things?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: No question. I think when you have somebody that's coming in and they averaged all these points and they led their team to an Elite 8, I thought she would come in and just take over. And not that she didn't, but she deeply cares about the people around her, almost to a fault. And I don't even know -- I don't even think she came in with this, where she exuded confidence, but she made the rest of us really confident by her being on the floor.

So she's grown through that and been able to see that, but she's also given everybody this unique belief not in winning or where you're going or, but just in their own games. She's defensively been a lot better than maybe I even anticipated. We knew we needed a low block defender, but she's got mobility. She's led the break sometimes for us. I love her, the growth that she's had. I think she can take some hits and be really physical.

I also am really impressed that she chose to play in the SEC conference. A lot of times players, especially like her, that are stronger and in their post play don't necessarily want to take that head-on because it can kind of make your game not look as good. But she chose to do that. I've just been really impressed with that, just her ability to be the ultimate team player.

Q. Obviously you're focused on this game and this season, but Aaliyah Chavez committed to Oklahoma recently. Can you talk about her skill set and how that fits what you're doing in this program and how that can take you to the next level?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I actually can't talk about recruiting because she hasn't signed yet, but I will say this team has done an amazing job of growing to be able to attract some attention from really high-level players, and I think it's because of the culture of this program and the foundation. So we're excited about continuing to evolve as

a program.

Q. Related to that, not exactly, but sort of the benchmarks of the growth of this program, I wanted to ask you about a couple of 'em. Getting Payton a couple years ago and that decision to transfer here and then Sahara, just how important were those moments to build to things that you've had, like Raegan, like some other recruiting wins that you've had that obviously have pushed ya'll to this level?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Obviously recruiting's the lifeblood of what you do, but culture eats strategy for breakfast, right? So if we don't take care of what we have in the locker room first, you don't get to attract the level of people that we're attracting. You want to attract that high-level player and at the same time look at all the players that have stayed. You look at Liz Scott coming back, you look at Skylar Vann and her growth. So proud of those moments.

And, yes, our world is different. Our world is different with the transfer portal, our world is different with the NIL platform, our world is just completely different, and it changed pretty much probably a month or two when I took this job. We went to a new conference. All the rules, laws, changed. We're following state laws. You know, we're trying to keep up with the NCAA and know more about litigation and courts than I would have ever wanted to, nor thought I would, and at the same time I think you still have to keep focus on your culture and your team and those relationships.

So every single one of those players didn't pick us because of any of those reasons. They picked us because they fell in love with the team and the place. I mean, Oklahoma, as you know, is a very special place. We have such unique people here. There's so many programs that compete every year for national championships. I mean, you talk about softball, women's gymnastics, and yet, our football team, every one of their members came to our game, our game against Iowa, and our head football coach was leading chants and cheers.

This is a special place, and I think when those players started to pick it, I think, yeah, there was more eyes on it, especially from a national perspective, but it really starts in that locker room and it really starts with the women. They believe in something bigger than themselves, and they believe -- you know, they want to play with a joy, they want to play with a passion, and they want to play for one another.

So to me, that's why those players are coming. That's what people are looking at. And then when they come,



they feel something different. That's what we want to continue to do.

Q. Here in Spokane, we cover Washington State where Kamie Ethridge and Deb Patterson are, where you got your career started at Kansas State, and I was able to talk to Deb and reflect on that WNIT championship season, and she talked about how special it was to have you and Kamie and Coach Lori Cane, who is also there. Was wondering if you would be able to take a couple minutes just to reflect on your relationship with them, what your relationship today is with them, and how special getting your start with coaches like that was.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I was so lucky. Like, I loved my experience playing, and a lot of people get into coaching because they either love it, don't know what else to do, or hated their experience, and they want other people to do well. And I loved it so much. And when I got done, I had no idea what I was going to do. I didn't say, Oh, I want to be the head coach or I want to do this.

I kind of got lucky enough to fall into it, and I don't know if there could have been better mentors to start. And when you're 22, you kind of think you know everything. Heck, when you're 43, you kind of think you know everything. But I learned so much in those couple years because they let me do so many things. They were such great mentors. I mean, you look at Kamie, and we obviously played Texas, and that's a big rival, and you see her jersey retired there. That's a big deal. I mean, she was a phenomenal player, but she has so much humility. Her work ethic, Deb's work ethic, they taught you so much about keeping it really blue collar, and I was just so impressed.

Lori Cane was a senior when I came in. We're the same age. She actually red-shirted a year, and I've never seen somebody shoot so well, and she was just this incredible player.

But I reflect now, after being in this seat for a number of years, and those were just pivotal moments. There's certain things that we're still doing in practice that I learned when I was 22. They're incredible people, they have got so much humility, and they're really, really good, and I was just really lucky to be a part of that.

Q. Two questions, but my first one I wanted to go back to Raegan Beers. You said that several players felt like they wanted to elevate their level of play since her arrival. What did that look like beyond the obvious of just hard work? Like, what specifically did that look like?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I think each player really took what their individual game is and said, Okay -- a lot of us said, Okay, we got to shoot the three better, right? Because if she's going to be in the paint. I mean, we weren't from Sahara Williams being a 5 for us a year ago and defending low block post play to having to defend best guards because of Raegan. I think that's elevated Lexy Keys saying, Okay, I got to be better on-ball defense because now I've got a rim protector in Raegan.

I think obviously the post passing, we've had to work on, and we've worked on that a lot, and we've turned it over a lot, and we have created a lot of opportunities. But we've had to kind of fall down and get up and work through that.

I also think that overall, you're just trying to work on your professional development, your skill set, to be able to play to each other's strengths. I think the other thing that we've really had to go through in that is we can't be a one-hit wonder. We can't have where we're just going to feed Raegan every possession of every game that we lose the rest of our movement. And we've had to grow through that and we've had to learn a lot -- we've had to learn a lot about the game -- we've had to live learn a lot, too. So we're playing against great teams, we've had to learn when she's on the floor and when she's off the floor, it can look a little bit different and we've had to grow through that.

So, I'm trying not to do coach speak with you, I'm trying to tell you. But there's so many different skill sets that everybody had to really hone in on and it wasn't, Hey, we got to work on these 10 things. It was, Okay, I need to do this better, I need to do this better, so that we can play to each other's strengths.

Q. Four years in, how do you feel about the trajectory of Oklahoma women's basketball?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Hell, I don't know yet (laughing). I mean, everything can change, right, in one second. So I will tell you, I was so impressed, I was so proud of what we walked into and so even people can say records, nobody wants to take over after a legend in Sherri Coale. I didn't. I didn't. I didn't think that I would ever want to do this and here I am. Right? God works in really mysterious ways. And it was the perfect time, it was the perfect fit from a team. And I can tell you, to have a legend like Sherri behind you and wanting the program to do really well and for it to be better than it was the day before, you don't get that either. That's what I'm really, really proud to be part of this program, but I also know that I'm just the gatekeeper of the program right now. I love where we're at, I love where we're going, we're still building a fan base, we need to continue to do that, that's important. Right now from a national perspective we're probably getting more attention

than we even do from a regional perspective and we need to continue to change that and I think we are and I think we're growing. But as coaches we want everything yesterday, and so I'm proud of where we're going and yet I know we have a long way to go.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll take the student-athletes in just a moment.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For all of you, how much did you learn in playing in the SEC this year and how do you think it's gotten you better and do you feel that's prepared you for a game like this?

SKYLAR VANN: I think being in the SEC has prepared us a lot. We've talked about this, I think, just the level of competition and the level of talent. Not a lot of conferences have that. So I think we're super lucky to experience that this season. I think it's prepared us completely. And we've had to adjust -- I think our defense is the best it's ever been, and you got to be able to guard in that conference to find success.

So we've just elevated that and because -- I mean, our offense has always been pretty strong, I feel like, but the defensive part is something we've always kind of struggled with, and I think this year we've improved on that.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, going off that, I think that we have learned to let our defense kind of help the flow of our offense, rather than the opposite where usually our offense is dependent on how good we play defense in that game, honestly.

But like she said, I think the SEC's full of a bunch of great players, and we've kind of had to learn how to throw different pieces and different defenses at them. So I think obviously when you look at a team like UConn, then that's something that I think will help us for this game.

RAEGAN BEERS: Ditto to everything that they said as well, but we saw a lot of athleticism in the SEC, I feel like, every single game. It was just insane. If you didn't box out, you weren't getting the rebound even if you were taller. You were getting out-jumped or something like that. So the athleticism night-in night-out in the SEC was something that has prepared us, I feel like, really well for the Sweet 16 and for the tournament.

So it was fun every single night to get good competition, I

feel like we didn't have a night off. Even if you thought you were going to have a night off, you didn't. So that was super fun in the SEC as well.

Q. For any of the players, just curious what challenges UConn presents to you, and in particular a player like Paige Bueckers.

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, great question. Obviously, you look at UConn, and they have been a dominant program for years, and they still are. I think just looking at Paige Bueckers, obviously she's a great player. I do think that the SEC has gotten us ready for really good guards. You look at Georgia Amoore and -- I mean, we got to play Kentucky twice, so I think just learning from things like that will definitely benefit us in this game.

RAEGAN BEERS: Going off that, Paige is a phenomenal scorer. You see her and sometimes she can score at will, a lot of the times she can. So it's going to be a challenge for us tomorrow that we're excited to go against. We have seen a lot of good guards, Georgia being one of them, and throughout the SEC so much athleticism similar to what UConn brings, Paige especially, and so it's going to be a fun challenge tomorrow.

Q. Skylar, does UConn remind you of any one team you played this year? And if so, how?

SKYLAR VANN: I mean, like they said, UConn's a great team. So I think the closest may be Kentucky, just because, like they said, Georgia Amoore, great guard, and they have bigs that can shoot, they have all around just a great skill set. I think that is probably the closest team to UConn, but UConn's its own program and it's a great program, so we're definitely not going to say they're exactly the same, but I think our game plan is just to play defense and try to be in those gaps, help each other out, leave nobody on an island.

Q. Raegan, what has this year been like for you, adjusting to a new conference, a new team, and how was it different than the PAC 12?

RAEGAN BEERS: Man, PAC-12 and SEC are very different conferences, to say the least. One similarity is that you did have competition night-in, night-out. That was in the PAC-12, a lot of great teams. And then in the SEC, it was definitely an adjustment coming to a much faster program than what I was used to. Oregon State ran lots of sets and Coach Rueck did a phenomenal job using the players that he had to make the tournament this year and then obviously last year making a run.

So it was very different coming here where you have a



coach that says, If it feels good, shoot it. It was a little -- not what I was used to, so I had to get comfortable with that just a little bit. But it was fun having a team to kind of rally around me and be like, It's going to come, you got it, because they have all been through it before, they all have been through that adjustment, that period where you got to get used to playing faster and shooting within four seconds of the shot clock, things like that.

So it was an adjustment, for sure, but I had a great group around me, supporting me to get over that hump, which eventually I did (laughing).

Q. Raegan, you talked about Scott, and you played with -- or you played for both Scott and Jennie in your career. Can you talk about how such great coaches helped you in developing your game and how they have been a big help throughout your career?

RAEGAN BEERS: A hundred percent. I think any one of us could talk about all the coaches that we have played for and how they have developed us. Scott did a phenomenal job of just helping you know the game so well. His brain just continues to work. You always see him thinking. He's got his little post where he's kneeling down and you know his wheels are turning.

But he just allows you to see the game with all the film study that he does so well. It's really cool how he helps you notice things differently and things like that. So he did a phenomenal job of that, helped me develop those skills.

Then you go to Oklahoma where have you Jennie who just pours the utmost confidence in you, you don't even have in yourself. I mean, I came here and adjusting to a program that was very different, had little confidence to start, and she has continued to pour it into me, pour into me, and she just is such an inspiring coach, but she is one of the most intimidating coaches at times because she gets so into it and, like, she just wants to win and that competitiveness is just a fire that lights in her. You can see it in her eyes because she gets a look, and you're like Oh, geez, she's ready to go.

So when have you that as a coach, then you can think less. So to have that balance of where you have Scott where you're thinking, and then you have Jennie where you're mad, and you kind of combine the two lessons learned from those coaches, it's a really fun place to be at.

Q. Raegan, forgive me if this sounds like a silly question, but I'm very serious. I've talked to a lot of guards and ball handlers who credit playing musical instruments for sort of their feel for the ball on the floor. I don't know if you play any musical instruments

but, pottery is obviously a very tactile art. Curious if you feel like that has helped you -- you have really good hands not just for a post, but for a player. Do you feel like that has helped you at all with sort of your feel for the ball?

RAEGAN BEERS: Well, thank you. Yes, I actually grew up playing piano, ironically. My whole family did, my siblings and I. And then, yes, I'm very much into pottery, do it just as much as basketball, probably. But it does give you a sense of feeling with your hands. Like, just getting the feel of the clay when you're throwing it on the wheel, it does give you a sense of you got to know what you're doing without even looking at it.

And sometimes in basketball, that's the case. You've got to figure out how to catch and shoot all in two seconds, and it's a feel, or a feel of when to post up or how to post up or the angle. It's all about feel or reading the game, and that's kind of a lot.

Similar in pottery. Like, you got to feel a piece of clay that's about to break, and you got to fix it before it does or something like that. So there are definitely similarities in that touch-wise, so, yeah.

Q. OU has not had a player like Raegan in a long time. Jennie talked earlier about how it took you guys a little while to adjust to having her in the flow. Talk about that progress and at what point this season do you think it started to finally really click for everybody?

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, I think, obviously, when Raegan came in and looked at our school, I think when she was on her visit, she kind of got to watch our practice, and I remember her mentioning like Wow, you guys play really fast (laughing). So obviously, then when she committed to Oklahoma, now it was we have a really great post player, and we had obviously great post players before but in a different type of way.

Sky can stretch out and play more of a 3, 4, 5, and Raegan is in there and when she has a mismatch, we need to find it. I think that is kind of what makes our team so special, is we have all these different pieces that Jennie has been able to make work and put together. And definitely when you have a more dominant big coming in, it's a different position now for everyone else shifting around it. But that's what makes us better and that's what makes us great.

I think it found us a little -- or it took a little time for us to find that this year, just because now people are stepping into different roles and different positions. But obviously, I think -- I don't know if there's one specific game that sticks out to me, but I would say about four or five games right

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before the SEC tournament, I feel like that's when it felt like we were really peaking.

And going into now, I think that, obviously, going back from our first and second round games, you look at us playing FGCU, and obviously Skylar and Raegan had great games, and we knew that was a team where we were going to really look at our inside presence and get it in and score in the paint as many times as we could. And then you look at a team like Iowa who plays pretty similar to us, and they get up and down a lot, and Skylar and Raegan got into foul trouble that game, and then you see that Zya Vann and Liz Scott come off the bench and are a really big piece for us. So I think that speaks on the versatility and depth that our team has this year.

SKYLAR VANN: I mean, I think everybody in this room knows Raegan's a great player, dominant in the post, but I think one thing for me, I think her as a person is the most important thing. I think a lot of us feel that way because you got to get along to be a great team. It doesn't matter how many good players you have.

But Raegan's just a great person. I remember on her visit, me and Payton were like, Okay, yeah, we like her. Like, we already knew she was good, we needed a big, we knew we needed a big since I've been here at OU, so. And we've been through a lot of recruits and stuff, but what stuck out to me was her bubbly personality, how kind she was. And then, going into the playing part, it was a huge adjustment, not just for Raegan it was a huge adjustment for us. Like I said, we've never had a post, especially a dominant post like her, where we were able to usually just cut wherever we want inside, and then get out, post whenever you want. And now it's like, Okay, we got to get Raegan involved in this. And that took us a couple months honestly and then I want to say probably five games like last five games of the SEC tournament I think something clicked and we found out -- we just like -- I don't know what it was, we just meshed, and like everything just felt like it flowed so well. And also just having Raegan be able to shoot inside and out, I think that also opens up a lot of stuff, not just for her only, opens up stuff for everybody where we can all cut now. It's like, oh, they can't just sag off Raegan on the three-point line now, and so I think that is something she's also added to her game I think being here and I think Jennie's brought that out of her, where now she doesn't think she can only shoot layups, she can also shoot the 3 and mid-range and that just makes us better as a team.

Q. Skylar and Raegan, Skylar, what was it like making that transition, seeing Payton make that transition during that mid-semester addition when she first arrived in Norman? And for Raegan, can you talk a

little bit about just how stabilizing it is for the team when she's on the court.

SKYLAR VANN: Well, when Payton got here we didn't know much about her, she just kind of showed up, not going to lie. But we she was on the practice team I remember and she was whooping all of our butts, seriously. And we're like, Oh, this girl can hoop for real. So I'm just super proud to see her game grow, and I think this year is the first year I feel like everybody's able to see what she can really do. And I always knew she could do it, but just to see it this year has been really cool, but I've always known since that first practice, she was in. I was like, Oh, this girl can shoot the ball, she can drive and pass? All right. And then she whooped us every practice pretty much. But she made us a better team then so, yeah, I was, it was really exciting when she came here, we were super lucky, yeah.

RAEGAN BEERS: I mean, going off that, Payton is, first of all, an incredible player, but she -- when she doesn't stop moving offensively and she just continues to set people up to get other people open, and then find herself shots, I mean we are good, good offensive team when that happens. I feel like Jennie has been putting that on her a lot this year, and a lot has been put on her to continue this year just to keep us where we need to be. Especially me coming in, kind of figuring things out and you have a lot of the young girls, younger girls, and you have the fifth-year seniors, but it was up to Payton a lot of the time to lead this team and really rely on her on the court as an on-court coach, to be the voice on the court calling plays whenever we need to do it, offensively, defensively. And when you have that, like someone like that who is not only a good player but like our coach on the court, it makes your life a whole lot easier, I'll tell you that. So, she's a phenomenal player and just adds so much to our team, and has been so fun to see her grow and she sets some mean screens that I come off of and it's fantastic, because then I get open layups. So just having her on the team is huge blessing this year, for sure.

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