

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

Oklahoma Sooners
Jennie Baranczyk

Raegan Beers

Payton Verhulst

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Connecticut - 82, Oklahoma - 59

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions for the Oklahoma student-athletes.

Q. Raegan, for you, it was a tough night in terms of efficiency and just getting the ball to you. What did UConn do well defensively or what just was going on tonight that you felt like led to this performance?

RAEGAN BEERS: Yeah, UConn, obviously phenomenal team. Geno's a great coach. Lots of good girls on there. Did a really good job of kind of sending two a lot of the time when we were in the paint, not just me, but anybody down there kind of packing it in there a lot. So a lot of shots didn't fall on the outside when we kicked it out, things like that, and so good luck to them in the next round.

Q. Payton, you guys have both been in the tournament before, so you've obviously felt the heartbreak before. What was your message to some of the younger girls in the locker room just barely?

PAYTON VERHULST: We had more of, like, a team thing that I just said to our seniors, our super seniors, that really started here with Jennie, that obviously this loss sucks, it should hurt, there's going to be tears and heartbreak, but I think the biggest message that I wanted them to hear was that they started this culture at Oklahoma, they started here with Jennie, and that's something they built and that's something that will remain here now. So I just wanted them to know.



And obviously, then, that message for our freshmen is that we're going to continue that culture. I just think that we're a blue collar program and that's something that they started and they came back for another year, and that's not like that everywhere, so I just wanted to let them know that.

RAEGAN BEERS: Ditto to everything that she said. Sahara put it, I think, phenomenally. When we were in the locker room just talking, she talked a lot about the seniors briefly, and then she said, This sport is not who you are. It doesn't define you. It's something -- it's a gift that we get to have. The opportunity to play is phenomenal and the opportunity to make it to the Sweet 16 is obviously such a blessing.

So she put it nicely, I feel like, after saying thank you to the seniors and saying but this isn't who we are. Of course we're going to take this heartbreak and let it fuel us going into next season. I'm already looking forward taking saying thank you to the people who have made it this far and now looking forward to see how we're going to advance the program next year.

Q. Really close first half and then UConn started to really score the ball in the second half and take over. What do you feel like shifted in the second half to lead to UConn then sort of taking over the game at that point?

RAEGAN BEERS: I would just say they hit shots coming out in the third quarter. Obviously coming off those screens, knocking down those shots, finding ways to score, they did a good job of that in that third quarter. And offensively sometimes we got stuck here and there. Obviously Payton did a great job of trying to keep us in it. I feel like she did. She didn't stop moving, she always wanted the ball, she always wanted to make something happen. And so to have someone out there like Payton to fuel us when that run wasn't going in our favor was super important and happy to have her on our team this year.

Q. UConn has a lot of experience in NCAA tournaments. There's no doubt about that. You have some players who are experienced, some players who

are not. What role do you think experience played in the outcome of this game, and particularly for you, Raegan, what -- obviously you were here last year with Oregon State, but what lessons can you take from this run to hopefully a run next year?

RAEGAN BEERS: I mean, obviously lots to learn from this game, and we're taking it all in stride. Obviously, we're going to, like I said, be thankful for the year we had and kind of move forward with next year and the people that we got coming in and kind of figure out how we're going to fit, how we're going to mesh together all over again next year because we are losing a good amount.

We're going to take this heartbreak, let it fuel us. Turnovers have to be something we care more about when we discuss that a little bit. But we're going to have to take care of those. Obviously, going into next year it's going to be a huge piece. Rebounding, obviously, another huge piece. Finishing. I know I need to do a better job of that. And so, so many pieces that we can take from this game to build our program more next year.

Q. Payton, talking about this game being such a gift and this tournament setting, I saw you in the stands afterwards with Oklahoma fans. Can you talk about what that interaction meant to you and just your overall thoughts on the fans traveling and being there?

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, of course. We've been really grateful for the movement and the traveling fans that we've had all year. I mean, we're in Washington, so it's not close (laughing). But we're just grateful. And we have a great set of families here that have been traveling with us all year, so our fans, our families, the people that support us, obviously. They get to see us at our best and our worst moments and they still support us no matter what, so I think that's just the biggest thing. And obviously, they know how much it hurts, so just seeing them in the crowd sometimes just puts a little smile on your face.

Q. Payton, from the outside, it's been really cool this season to watch just everything building around this program fan-wise and the support, social media, going to the game on Monday in your home arena. How does that feel as a player and how much wind do you feel is at the back of this program now moving forward?

PAYTON VERHULST: Absolutely. I think it's really easy to look at this year and say this is the start of Oklahoma now becoming what we know we can become, but again, I just really look back to those seniors that came back for another year and since they have been here and since Jennie got here, I think that's just what this program -- where this program started. And obviously, now you guys

get to see the snowball effect and it's just going to keep getting better.

But it's just the culture that we have at Oklahoma that's just unmatched, and I think really unique, and I think that's why you see us having so much fun when we play basketball.

RAEGAN BEERS: Ditto. Everything that she said. And when it comes to a great culture, that starts with your head coach, and that goes a lot to show what Jennie has done with this program since she has been here, who she's able to recruit, the confidence that she puts on you not just as player, but as a person. She was encouraging all the seniors just to go and continue to love the sport of basketball and make others love it.

When you have a coach like that who sets the tone for that culture and then brings in people like that to then further that, it's truly a special place to be where you love what you do, and you love who you do it with, and you love the leader who is leading you through it all.

Q. Payton, you talked about the fans, but, Raegan, I believe it was your mom and your sister who were sitting behind me, and I don't think they sat down the entire game. Just wondering how you feel about the support you get from your family. They were yelling quite a bit as well during the game. Do you hear them during the game? What kind of motivation do you get from that and sort of what role have they played in your basketball life?

RAEGAN BEERS: I have a great support system, to say the least. I know my brothers were also watching. They were probably yelling at me through the TV. I can guarantee it. My grandparents have come to so many games. Family friends who are here who were at Oregon State and they got to drive up and come see me. My dad was, of course, here. You probably heard his whistle. It's going viral. I have just a phenomenal support system at home and that just makes the game of basketball so much easier when you have that and you can just, after a hard day, call and be like, Hey, it was a tough day, and they can just pour into you. And then it was -- it's so cool to have that also, because then it just solidifies where you are in the program I chose. Every single -- whoever was surprised through social media or whatever people were like, Oh, why did she go there, why didn't she go here. My family, the core of my family were like, Oh yeah, you're going to love it there, and I know you're going to love it there. My high school coach has poured into me all year, texting me, every single day for the past two weeks. I mean, to have that is so much, such a blessing. The Lord has truly given Missouri a gift to play basketball with people that I love surrounded by so many people that I love and I

cannot be more thankful for them.

THE MODERATOR: We'll let the student-athletes go and take questions for Coach.

Q. How does it feel hearing what Raegan had to say about you and what you mean to her and the girls.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know, after games like that you kind of have to be reminded why you do what it is that you do. Because you do, you go right into, Man, that wasn't good. And you go right into, We needed to be so much better. You go right into the next season.

But we're really lucky that the character of the women in that program keep you going. I think our student-athletes are our best teachers. Obviously, I know I need to be better, but also they're right, the foundation of this program is really special. And although we want things yesterday and we want to win every game that we play, we know we're heading in the right direction and we're doing a lot of the right things. We need to get better, we know that. But it's always going to start with people first, and we're just lucky that we have these amazing women in that locker room.

Q. I want to confirm that you have six players who won't be returning, is that correct, Liz Scott, Lexy Keys, Aubrey Jones, Skylar Vann, Peyton Verhulst, and Nevaeh Tot, or is that --

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Payton will be back.

Q. Could you speak to what the five of those players have meant to your program and what you will miss from them, but also maybe what they, the lessons that they have taught others that will carry on?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Yeah, what an awesome class. You're talking about a class that went through COVID their senior years in high school, and then they stayed. That's a challenging time to still really be on a team when you're told to be not on a team. You can see their formative years, the foundation of this program, the love that they have put into the program, their willingness to look in the mirror and get better or their willingness to own their own mistakes, and yet see their value in themselves and the people around them. I think that's when Skylar Vann's the first one to talk in the locker room, you know it was pretty impressive, because she's like, I know you guys are going to do this next year. You don't usually get that from a senior like her. She was asked at a press conference a few games ago about having a challenging year, and she said, This is my favorite year because when you get to see other people are really good it makes you get better. And I

think those are lessons sometimes that are overlooked in sport, especially now. And so those five women have stayed really convicted, and what's really challenging about it is I don't like to use the word "roles," but that's the easiest word to resonate. Their roles changed over time, and they had to adapt and they had to pour into younger players and they had to pour into people that transferred into our program. And they did. And they stayed and they loved harder even when it was hard. And when you have a senior class like that, great things tend to happen. And yet it still leaves you hungry and thirsty for more.

Q. Hard-fought game for you guys, but in that second half when you see Paige go on that heater that she goes on, do you kind of just have to tip your hat or how do you try and defend and calibrate when something like that is going on and you're in the midst of something like that?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, you know she's so good, and we knew that coming in. And, quite honestly, she probably missed some shots in the first half that she would like to have back. Then obviously she was on fire, and I think that we just didn't respond very well either. I think in the first half we kept going and we kept trying and we would fight through some of the ball screens a little bit harder than maybe we did in the second half. But when we turned it over a few too many times and gave 'em a few open looks where you can start to feel really good in that, and that's something that's kind of been Achilles for us that we've had to get used to. But there's an element as a coach where you can't ever say you're super satisfied with how you guarded, and she just made plays. And there's the other part of you that knows that she's really good. We have seen a left film on her and it's not like this is the only time that she's ever done that. But she was really, really good today.

Q. Payton was your leading scorer tonight with 16, what did her game and effort tonight mean for you all despite the loss?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, she sparked us in the second quarter to really give us some life. We've been a pretty, we've done really well actually coming out at halftime, so that actually surprised me that we didn't. But I do feel like she got us -- once Connecticut made their -- we started great, then they made their run, I think she helped us make another run. But I love her versatility and she just does such a great job when she doesn't have the ball in her hands, and her movement and her offense. We just couldn't get her the ball much in the second half. Part of that is some of the things that we needed to do better and part of that is their defense. But Payton's a phenomenal player and you got to see a little bit why. She deserves to

get back on this stage next year and she deserves to be really hungry in the off-season, because her best basketball's ahead of her.

Q. It's been a common theme talking about moving forward here the program. You finally broke through, you get to play in a packed house here against a premier program. How are you going to try to take this momentum on the recruiting trail or elsewhere this summer to make sure this program continues on the ascent?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, recruiting's the lifeblood of what you do, and we've got to establish more of a culture. We've got incredible people that work really hard, and they have never worked this hard, and they're going to work harder. And I think that's, they have both said it, we are, we're a blue-collar program, and I think a lot of people look at us and believe that. I think the SEC has taken us to a different level from an exposure standpoint, so we have more interest in our program right now. We have a lot of people that have actually reached out to us. So I know it will continue to evolve because of the women in that locker room, but also we want to get better and we want to attract players that really want to take us to another level and want to have a great team to do it. So we're going to do it the right way and I know that -- I just know that we're going to do it. We're going to find a way. We've got great administrative support, our fan base is growing, and we're really, really hungry to get better, and that's what we have to be able to do, we got to roll up our sleeves and we got to work, and we'll find a way to do it.

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