

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

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Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

Oklahoma Sooners

Coach Jennie Baranczyk

Sahara Williams

Aaliyah Chavez

Raegan Beers

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Oklahoma head coach Jennie Baranczyk. Before we start, if you wanted to talk a little bit about the journey to Sacramento through the NCAA Tournament and a little bit about that process.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, we are just thrilled that we got to host again this season, and happy to have Oklahoma people here today, too.

Love this team. Love the growth that we've had. It's been a fun mix of youth and experience, and just really excited to be here.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. You guys played here in November. How helpful was that, if at all, getting used to the facilities, the arena from that point? You've played South Carolina before, so how much does that help you with the familiarity with a team you've already played and had some success against?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, as my daughter noticed -- today's her birthday, she's here, she turned 12 today -- so she noticed every step she got to come with us. So for her, we're used to a lot of things. For me, who knows if it helps you to be able to play?

Do I think it helped us playing a UCLA in November here? Absolutely. I don't think that can hurt you. I think when



you're playing against great teams, it exposes you early and you have to learn and you fall down.

We're lucky to play in the SEC conference, too, for that very same reason. So when you face a team like South Carolina, you've played them before, you've gotten beat by a lot. You've gotten closer. And we obviously had a game in overtime.

So that's why you play in that league, is it prepares you for the NCAA Tournament. I remember Dawn telling us that, it's my second year in the SEC, and I remember her telling us that this league does, one, it makes a woman out of you; and, two, it definitely gets you prepared for that next level.

So do I think there are some things? I think we played okay. I think we had some moments that we played really well in that game. I think we had moments that we didn't.

Do I think they played their A game? Probably not. So you still have to be ready. And I don't know if that helps you or hurts you, but at the end of the day, it's a basketball game. It's in the Sweet 16, and the margin of error is really, really small. And at least we go in knowing that. And we better be ready.

Q. How much have Beers and Verhulst affected the program? And also with your younger players, how much have you seen develop over the year?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I think Raegan is one that she came in and obviously had great success at Oregon State and then all of a sudden we know what happened and why it happened and we were so lucky and fortunate to have her.

I will forever be impressed with her picking this conference to play in. She could have gone anywhere. And for her to pick a team that was on the edge, she's taken us to a different level. And it's been amazing to be able to watch her progress and to be able to watch her become more assertive and confident, and I think she's just led us in great ways.



Payton is very similar to that. Payton took a chance on us as well and at a different time. She was hungry. She's really started to build this.

Imagine, the experience that Payton has had -- she came in, we didn't have a post, we're in a 5-out, we're in the Big 12, she had to sit out a semester -- she's grown so much. So to be able to watch her navigate this journey to be able to play with a young point guard in Aaliyah and really lead a young team this season has been phenomenal to watch.

So I love the way that our freshmen -- sometimes, I love the way that they're playing. Sometimes, they're freshmen. But at the end of the day, the fact that they still have smiles on their faces, they're getting this unmatched experience playing in this conference, playing in the NCAA Tournament. This is their first Sweet 16, and so I'm excited to be able to watch them step on the floor and just continue to grow.

So I think they're developing. I think they've had fun playing. I think they've failed. I think they've done great things and everything in between. So I love the mesh of our worlds, and just excited to continue to be part of the journey with them.

Q. You're obviously one of the fastest teams in the country. You guys push and play with tempo. I'm just wondering, how do you build that mindset where even when the other team scores, you take it out of the net and we're going, and you try to get your team to just play fast and not worry about sort of makes or misses from the other team, that we're just going to play with this aggressive mentality on offense no matter what?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I really do feel like and I'm kind of going to add to that the question I was just asked, well, in twofold, one, sometimes there's the misconception that a center like Raegan Beers can't play at that pace, and I don't agree with that.

It makes you be assertive and it makes you position. It makes you be in alignment with one another more than you think. It's not just roll it out and somebody go make a play. You have to be on the same page at all times. And so that's something that I've been impressed with.

Our young players learn the pace isn't always just in a fast-break set. We're still learning, trying to get it in the half-court look, too. Because sometimes you're not going to get it in the first six seconds, seven seconds. You've got to be able to work it, and so have you to be able to learn both.

But I think that's part of who we are. The reason that I do that is I want five people on the floor as scorers at all times, at all times. I want everybody to rebound. I want everybody to defend. I want everybody to handle. I want everybody to shoot. When you are like that and you build your chemistry, it's really challenging to guard, but more so than that, it's really fun to play.

That's my goal in this whole thing, is for them to love the game of basketball and to be able to play it, to be able to read it, to be able to celebrate and assist just as much as a screen, just as much as a basket made. And I think you can see that in our players.

The seasons get long. This is a lot on young people, especially right now. Like I, I know this crazy world that we're in is really benefitting young people. But it's also not easy for them. And so for them to still find the fun and the light and the love -- we're gatekeepers of not just Oklahoma or the SEC or college women's basketball, we're gatekeepers of this sport.

So that's what I want. I want these young boys and girls -- we're still trying to build a fan base, right? We're trying to build dreams for young people to come in and watch, but that's why we do that. And the more that you do that, the more fun that you have, sometimes the faster you go.

Q. Going back to that South Carolina game. It was at a time when you guys kind of needed a confidence boost.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You mean because we lost a lot right before that? Yep.

Q. But it was very emotional after the game, in a really good way. I wonder what it was like for your team, because I know you still had a lot of SEC season, but what that game meant both for the team and particularly to Aaliyah, because she really stepped forward in that overtime. What did that mean to both?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know, the outside world, right, well, they got inside a huddle -- but the outside world thinks that the emotion came from the win. The emotion didn't come from the win of a game. The emotion came because we're a young team trying to navigate life together.

You're trying to bring in, especially at that time, you have this center that's really good. You have a playmaker in Payton that's really good. You have Sahara Williams, who has just this incredible energy and presence about her.

And then you mix it with freshmen, and at that, you mix it with an Aaliyah Chavez, who was a fairly ball-dominant

guard coming in, learning how to play with really great players around her and putting them in position.

At that time, the emotion was more about us playing together, and you could feel that togetherness. You could feel those assists. You could feel the pace. You could feel the way that you played. That was really where that emotion is.

So I don't think it was even you win or lose. It's not like we were sitting there and thinking the rain was on us and we were feeling so sorry for ourselves. It was, okay, it doesn't feel good to lose. I mean, those two weeks feel like three months. They really do. That's the intensity of this sport and of this league.

But I would say that that emotion wasn't because we won a basketball game. That emotion was because of how we played. And when you play like that, then sometimes that scoreboard is on your side.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about -- I know it seems like an obvious question -- what makes South Carolina so tough this season, with the way that Edwards has progressed, Okot, the variety of guards they can throw at you, what makes them so difficult to face?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: What I think about South Carolina is that you don't get just this year's team. You get the history of South Carolina. You get their experience that's unmatched. You get a Raven Johnson that has had any and every kind of experience in that leadership. You get a Tessa Johnson who has done nothing but hit huge shots over and over and over again. And then you add a Ta'Niya Latson into that mix, that's a different guard, that's a play-making guard.

So just right there, you know, that's a challenge enough. Obviously, I think Madina Okot has had an incredible season. Just her versatility, she's shooting the 3 ball more. You can't just sit and pack a paint. They're offensively so skilled and defensively so disciplined.

And I haven't even mentioned Joyce yet. And Edwards is so beyond special. I got to coach her this summer in USA, So she's high character. She plays very, very hard. She's a match-up nightmare because of her strength and her size and her ability to maneuver in small spaces.

She just finds ways. So to me, they're very, very well balanced. They're a team that's used to the moment. And you never get to play this year's team at this time; you're playing a lot of history there.

Q. Obviously Aaliyah Chavez had an amazing

performance in that overtime period. And I feel like that's kind of what really helped her case for one of the best players, freshmen in the nation. I'm wondering, what kind of conversation do you have with her healed of this game, because there was so much attention on her after that performance? And also what's the biggest thing you've seen her grow from at the beginning of the season to now?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: Well, I feel like Aaliyah, she's not a one-hit wonder. She just gets better and better and better. And she's learning more and more and more.

Some freshmen have great games and then they don't, and then they do and then they don't. She hasn't really been like that for us. She's just been really, really steady.

I've been really impressed with her daily approach. Therefore, no conversation's needed. She shows up. She loves playing the game. She is so simple. She loves her team. She loves -- she's not afraid of anything and yet she just wants to work for it.

So she doesn't even come into a game to win the game. She comes in to play the game. And she wants to win, and a lot of times she does win. But she's like addicted to learning the game. She wants to have those conversations.

I mean, you'll watch her run over during a timeout and want to articulate things. You'll watch her, if you really watch her, she'll be like, okay, we need to run this for Raegan what do you think? I'm like, you go right ahead.

Her ability to, at the beginning of the year, not use many words, to now really starting to articulate in some timeouts, to play-calling sometimes for her teammates -- sure, she will come down and there's times where she feels like I have to do this.

She's gone from, I have to do this all the time to, let's figure this out together, and not in terms of me and her, but her and her team. So you can see that natural leadership really growing.

I've just been -- she's a coach's dream. I know there's outside stuff sometimes that gets projected onto her. I don't really think it's fair. Because I think that everybody that plays with her loves her. Everybody that gets to see what she does every day respects her. And they know that, at the end of the day, she wants to win and she's going to put -- she's going to put us in positions to do that. But she's also not afraid to fall.

Sometimes people can get really heady about things or get

really worried about what they did in a five-minute segment in January. That's not where Aaliyah's at. Aaliyah's at today. She just focuses on what she needs to do today.

Q. You've talked about Zya being the most improved player in the SEC several times. Curious to ask you about how you've sort of seen her grow into her role. I know you've said she doesn't have the most outward personality, but how have you seen her grow into that and help lead this team?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I love watching Zya. I really do. Again, somebody that's in the gym all the time. Someone that, you know, talk about growing with somebody, and she's somebody that just looks at our team and sees greatness in everybody around her and knows that she has to bring it. And I think that's what's really elevated her game.

That's not easy for a sophomore to do. A lot of times sophomores can get really intimidated by certain things, and she doesn't. She just knows that she's got to get better. She knows she has to come in really focused. She knows that she's got to guard. She knows that there's times that she's going to have to get switched on to a post and do whatever she can.

There's times where she has to make really big plays for us offensively. She hasn't shied away from one moment. And, again -- I think I probably keep saying this too much, and it might be the parent in me; it might be the fact that I have a daughter's birthday so I'm in kind of a different mode today -- but, you know, when you can see young people fall down, get up and go, the difference between a-year-ago Zya Vann, and today's Zya Vann is completely different.

You guys get to see it on the court. I get to see it every day. And every day I see her show up and work and work through some things that are challenging, that to me, Zya's going places in life.

So even her confidence, the way she carries herself, the words she's using where a year ago she wasn't using many, you can just see her continuing to grow. Thanks for asking about her.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Sahara Williams, Aaliyah Chavez and Raegan Beers.

Q. Sahara, specifically for you, I know you mentioned you were overlooked by some programs. What was it about Oklahoma that made this home for you, as well as what your coach did so special for you during your recruitment?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: Jennie was different. She was all about being blue-collar. She didn't really care about a story a past or anything. She just wanted people who were going to come and work hard and just play the game of basketball, and not come in for any other extra things.

So I think just Jennie's belief in young women I think was what really stood out to me and the culture that she really believes in, I just thought it was something that I could be here and build with her. So that's why I was just so confident in coming to Oklahoma.

Q. Raegan, you've had the opportunity to match up against Madina Okot a couple times over the last two seasons now in the SEC. I'm wondering how that scout has evolved for you watching her?

RAEGAN BEERS: Obviously her outside shot has developed the past few years, which I think is so cool to see as a fellow post player who is also trying to work on my outside shot. So to be able to to see that in someone else and other post players who are working on that is really cool. Obviously that part of the scout has changed.

But she is a phenomenal rebounder, offensive rebounder specifically. She gets in there, so we have to be able to to focus on that, obviously. And then she's a threat on the block. And that girl can score. So it's going to be really important obviously to keep her far away from the basket as possible tomorrow. So obviously that will be my job along with our team. So I'm excited to go up against her again.

Q. Sahara, you wrote that Oklahoma was the only school to offered me the kind of love and support that you needed for it to feel like home. Can you tell us about a moment that you felt that during your process?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I would say, honestly, Jennie was a coach at Drake first. I'm from Iowa, an Iowa girl. Then when she got the job here, she kept recruiting me. That's when I was like, oh, yeah, she is really a fan of my game. And I'm just as big of a fan of her and how she coaches and her philosophy. So I think when she got the job here and she continued to recruit me, I think that was a big moment for me.

Q. Aaliyah, can you talk about just the evolution of your game this season? Jennie talked about how it's a learning process for anybody, but especially for a point guard. Can you talk about that, and specifically, maybe what you learned from that game against South Carolina?

AALIYAH CHAVEZ: Definitely just, like she said, my game is growing each and every day during practice, during games, even outside the court.

But the huge thing that I learned during that game is just the pace. I feel like definitely at the very beginning we were kind of -- we were sped up more than we needed to be.

I think obviously in that third and fourth quarter we slowed down and started playing Oklahoma basketball. So that's what I learned, for sure.

Q. Raegan, you got pretty emotional after the Michigan State game. Not to get you too emotional again, but talk about what your feeling is about what you've been able to accomplish in two years at Oklahoma and what you feel like maybe you and the other veteran players have done as far as setting the tempo for this program going forward.

RAEGAN BEERS: My team learned anything about me is that I'm a crier in my two years here. So lots of emotions for sure after that game. One of my last games my last game at Lloyd Noble which was an emotional time because I love those fans and I love those people and I love this place.

It's been incredible to have two years here under Jennie, a phenomenal coach who not only believes in you as a player but believes in you as a person, and like Sahara mentioned earlier, wants you to be a strong woman and be able to go out and do amazing things in the world.

It's been great to be a part of the culture that pushes that and have a coach that encourages that in you.

And so then to be surrounded by 10 other girls this year who want that for you as well that want to you have fun and enjoy your last year has been an incredible journey for me these last two years.

Q. Raegan, in this 5-out system that you guys run, how do you feel your game has grown over the past couple of years, because obviously it's a different style and system that you played at Oregon State and it's more up-tempo? But Jennie said it's wrong to think that someone like you can't play and feed in this style.

RAEGAN BEERS: It was really cool when I was first being recruited by Jennie out of the transfer portal. I was very hesitant. I was like, Jennie, I'm not that fast. I don't know if I can play that fast. You all play really fast.

When I came on the visit and she showed me film of me doing something at Oregon State, and then Oklahoma doing it. She 's, like, you really did it, just in a different jersey. You really did it. You'll be doing more of that.

That was really cool and got me to see a vision that I didn't see yet and that Jennie could see, which was really unique.

Now I love playing fast. When we slow down the practice, I'm, like, what are we doing? Like, let's get going, you know what I mean? It's been cool seeing that.

And Aaliyah coming here, obviously, and then Zya elevating the speed of our of game 100 percent, when we have guards who can push the ball like that and then keep our pace in the half court, we're a tough team to guard. So obviously we need to be able to do that tomorrow and be consistent in that, which is going to be fun.

Q. This is your fifth match-up against a Dawn Staley coached team. In three of the past four you've dropped 15 or more points. What's led to that success, and how much does that help in that stage of the tournament?

RAEGAN BEERS: That's cool. I know I played them a lot. Okay. Nice. I guess I have the experience a little bit.

They're a phenomenal team, obviously. I've played anywhere from Kamilla Cardoso to now Okot, two phenomenal post players.

And so I've just gotten better every time I've played them. They're one of the standards in women's basketball. So I think it's really cool. And we have the standard at Oklahoma because of the experience we've had in the tournament for last year and this year.

It's been fun to play against really good teams, South Carolina being one of them. And March Madness is such a cool time for that.

So, what a unique opportunity we have to play in the SEC and come here and play morally good teams in the tournament, South Carolina being one.

We've got a lot of work to do obviously tomorrow to be able to to handle them. But we're a good team, too. They've had to scout us, too, but I'm excited to go up against them for the fifth time, you said? Sixth time? Fifth time.

Q. Raegan, how much does it help you guys familiarity, having played them this year already and had success when you watch the film and you see

things that you can work on, but also have success with?

RAEGAN BEERS: Obviously you want to look back at the film and say, okay, what did we do well and what were the things we can improve on. But also, in my opinion, I felt that years ago that we played them.

So we are two very different teams as of now. They've obviously improved since then and so with have we.

So it's going to be a similar game to how we play, but also very different. So they still have obviously scorers inside and outside, and so do we.

So we have to be consistent in a lot of the things that we do on defense, knowing our personnel, knowing who we gotta guard on that 3-point line and who can see lights out, and knowing who we gotta box out and not let them rebound.

And so many things that they do well, we have been working on to combat. So I'm proud of us for the work that we put in to get to this point and the work that we've put in this week to prepare for them tomorrow.

Q. Aaliyah, can you talk about how you and the fellow freshmen have progressed this season, and how important was it to have veterans like Raegan and Sahara and Payton to help guide you and to make your game better as a freshman this year?

AALIYAH CHAVEZ: Both of them have been leaders to me, have been sisters to me. Been my calm people, so they have been huge in my journey here at Oklahoma.

But I feel like all of the freshmen are growing each and every day. We're just having more confidence each day, each practice, each game. So we're just growing each and every day.

Q. Sahara, it almost sometimes feel like you're the energy source of the entire gymnasium, and you also sometimes have to play smaller than you are and larger than you are, as a defender because you defend all sorts of players. I wonder where that energy and sort of that ability to just be kind of a Swiss Army knife comes from. And, Raegan, and if you could talk about playing with somebody like her?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think for me, when you just love something, you just do it to the best of your ability. And I think it's such a blessing that every day we get to play basketball and we get to play in March. So I think that's just why I kind of play so hard. I mean, we work so hard at

it, how do you not want to come out and play?

And I think when you have people like Raegan and Aaliyah and the rest of our staff and people on our team, it's kind of hard not to show up. And when you can do something so special it's so kind of hard not to show up.

So, I think, for me, that's just where it comes from, the love of the game and then just the love of the people that I get to do it with.

RAEGAN BEERS: I think a Swiss Army knife is a great, honestly, way to describe Sahara. I wouldn't have thought about it like that, but that's a great analogy. And one such cool thing about Sahara because she is that way is that one game she could have 20 points and be a ferocious person on defense, and the next game she can maybe have five points but then she's going to have eight assists.

So she really is a utility player in a way for our team. And I think for her and Payton actually both do that a lot of the time, doing the things that people don't necessarily want to do all the time. She's always the first one to close out and clap in front of somebody and distract them enough so they missed that 3-point shot or something like that.

She has that energy of a bullet at times. So that just uplifts everyone around her and uplifts our team and forces us to reach her level. Because when she plays at that level we are really good. And then that forces us to play at that level because she is doing that. And so that has elevated our team, that has elevated this program and that has elevated Oklahoma.

Q. Aaliyah, you had a great match-up against South Carolina in round one. How does that success help you this time around when it's win or go home? And specifically being guarded by Raven Johnson what do you remember about that match-up?

AALIYAH CHAVEZ: Really all I remember is how my team made sure I got them wide-open shots. That's all it is. Obviously they put the trust in me to make those shots. They passed it to me to make those shots.

Just like Raegan said, like, we've gotten better and they've gotten better. So we're just going to come out and play Oklahoma basketball and make sure that we come out and make sure we know our scouts and know what we need to do on defense and how we need to push the ball on offense.

Q. Aaliyah, as you've grown into the season, how have you found your pace of play? Because I watch you play and it's out of the net, boom, we're up, and you're

down the floor so quickly. As you've grown into the season, how have you sort of learned that pace of when to play fast, when to slow down, and finding that sort of middle ground?

AALIYAH CHAVEZ: I think I'm just growing each and every game. I mean, there's really we play different teams. Some days you have to push as fast as you can and some days you have to slow it down. Obviously I think a huge part was that South Carolina game, the last time we played them, because we were sped up a little too much in the first quarter -- or first half. And you could tell I think coming out that third quarter you see that obviously I had the ball in my hands a lot. So I determine how fast we need to go and how slow we need to go.

So I definitely think that's been a huge challenge, but I've been growing each and every game.

Q. Sahara, this year will be your fourth time you've played South Carolina the last two years. That first one didn't go so well in Columbia. But you've gotten progressively better. Beat them at Norman this year. Can you talk about how getting familiar with them and their talent and ability and everything else has helped this team and how much confidence you have going into this fourth meeting?

SAHARA WILLIAMS: I think, first of all, they're a really, really good team, and each time we've played them, it's definitely been a different type of game. But I think having experience -- experience is your best teacher. You never really know until you play. You never really know how it feels until you're under the lights in the big moments.

And I just feel like our last time we played them kind of showed like, okay, we've got the experience and we have the talent. So when you get experience and talent, I think really good things happen. But I think this team has just grown and grown and grown and grown, and even from the first time that I played them last year, like you said, it was like not our best game. And even, like, our last time we played them it was like look at how much we've grown, and that was even in January, and like two months ago. It's like, okay, we're a different team today.

So I'm just excited to see how much that we've grown, and I know they're a different team. They've had to scout us and we've had to scout them. But I'm just excited to see how much, like, we've really, really grown.

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