

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Dakota State vs Oklahoma State

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

## Oklahoma State Cowgirls

Jacie Hoyt

Anna Gret Asi

Micah Gray

Stailee Heard

Media Conference



**Q. Stailee, new opponent this week. Just what have you seen from South Dakota State, and what do you think they do well and could maybe give you guys some problems?**

STAILEE HEARD: Honestly, they're a really good team. They're well-coached. They play together really well. I think if we show up and just play our best basketball, we'll win the game.

We're coming in here underrated, and I think that's been our motive all season long. But I don't think we take that lightly. I think that fuels us and makes us better.

If we just play like us, I don't think they'll give us problems.

**Q. Getting ready for this one, obviously, against South Dakota State, talk about where you guys are seeded. Has that played any factor in the preparation for this one? And just coming to a place where you know basketball has meant so much, and they've had so much success, how cool is it to get a chance to be in the NCAA Tournament and have an opportunity at UConn?**

MICAH GRAY: I think it's pretty amazing what we have done. The whole goal for our whole team, honestly, was to get to March Madness, and we did it. I think we're just very grateful for the opportunity. The seedings, it's okay, but we still got into March Madness. I think that's the big goal right there. Who we play and stuff like that, it really doesn't matter. We're still here. We still have a chance to win.

ANNA GRET ASI: Yeah, what she said, just kind of piggybacking off of that. We just want to play. We don't look too far ahead. We're just kind of focused on the moment.

STAILEE HEARD: I think UConn has so much history, basketball history, that it's an amazing environment to play in and a great place to be. Of course, making it to the tournament was our ultimate goal, and here we are.

I feel like we just have to -- we did all the work up until now, and I feel like we just have to relax and go play and be

**Q. I'd like to get all three of your perspectives. You guys have talked all season long about the sisterhood and extending this season and playing together for as long as you can. How much of that is going to be on your mind and drive you guys this weekend?**

ANNA GRET ASI: I think, obviously, at the moment that we're playing, that's not the first thing on our mind. The first thing is to win the next -- win the game that we're playing. But in general, just being a part of this team is something that we all appreciate a lot and we're grateful for.

I think it just drives us to focus more on what we need to do to stay playing as long as we can.

MICAH GRAY: Just more of what she said. I think it just fuels our motivation for just to keep playing as long as possible, to keep winning, fight for each other, and when we get tired, that's another thing to think about and just keep fighting for.

STAILEE HEARD: They said it best. I think we just enjoy being around each other, and I don't think we take any of this for granted. I think just being around each other and playing for each other is what we talk about most, and our sisterhood is what it's been all season. We've fought for each other. We've won some big games. But I think this is a new season, and we've just got to take it one year at a time.



ourselves and have fun.

**Q. Your coach has coached against South Dakota State in the same conference before coming to Oklahoma State. Has she talked about that at all as you guys have been preparing for the Jackrabbits?**

STAILEE HEARD: No, not really. She hasn't said much about it, but I feel like she knows enough, and of course she coached against them. I think she knows enough, and they've prepared a really good scout for us, so it'll be a good game.

**Q. NCAA Tournament experience, not a lot necessarily for the team. Anna Gret, how much do you feel like you guys have to lead by example, to have to come to a press conference like this, what this is all about, what it takes to win in the NCAA Tournament? How much does this team lean on you as a leader? I'm curious what you guys have learned from Anna Gret in that process?**

ANNA GRET ASI: We haven't really talked too much about, like, of our team not having that experience too much. This is kind of a newer type of experience for me, as well, because the last time I went, that was -- like, I was a sophomore. I wasn't really the leader of the team or anything like that.

I feel like for everybody, this is kind of new. Yeah, I might have a little bit more experience, like just being here, but just in general, I feel like everybody is kind of just excited and enjoying the experience now.

MICAH GRAY: I think, honestly, we're all just taking it one game at a time. Of course, the lights are brighter. Everything is much more illuminated, but it's still the game of basketball. We grew up playing this game since we were younger. I think we're just taking it one game at a time and just being present in the moment.

STAILEE HEARD: Yeah, I'm pretty sure all three of us have dreamed about playing in March Madness as little girls. To be here is actually really cool and real special. Honestly, just enjoying it like they said, having fun with each other, enjoying each other, enjoying our coaches and just being grateful for what we get to do and why we do it.

JACIE HOYT: We are certainly excited to be here and to get to play in this tournament, and March Madness is just such a blessing, something that everyone wants to be a part of, but not everyone gets to do.

So, we're certainly excited to be here and just soaking up everything great that comes with being a part of this.

We've got a really motivated group right now. I think I'm feeling very fortunate because I think a lot of times this time of the year you see some players who can maybe check out or start to get a little fatigued with the lengthiness of the season, but that is not this crew at all. They're just excited and motivated and want to play as long as possible. That's the goal while we're here.

**Q. You guys have had such a great run, especially improving from last season to this season. At what point in the season did you feel like you guys started to play your best basketball?**

JACIE HOYT: I think that it's been something that really kind of started to click for us as early as our non-conference. We had a lot of new players that joined up with some of our previous players. You never really know until you play some higher-level competition kind of where you stand. But I think that even before that, in the non-conference, just with the way we were able to score, breaking records, seeing the chemistry that this group had together, that's when we started feeling like we've got something special here.

But then right at the beginning of Big 12 I think is when I would say I felt like, okay, we really are as legit as I thought we were. It's been fun to just see them get better and better every game.

I think we're playing our best basketball right now, to answer your question specifically.

But I would say the beginning of Big 12 is when I think that I, along with everyone else, kind of felt like, okay, this team is for real.

**Q. Coach, I know you have some familiarity with South Dakota State. With that being the case, did you feel like this was kind of a tough draw for your team, that SDSU was probably better than most 10 seeds you'll see in this tournament?**

JACIE HOYT: Absolutely, without a doubt. I think it's about the toughest draw we could have gotten for the 10 seed. I have just so much respect for the program. They know how to win. They are very well-coached. They're incredibly fundamentally sound.

I think it's probably safe to say about every kid on the team grew up watching the previous teams, probably went to camps. They're like a bunch of well-trained robots out there.

They know how to play the game, and they know how to

win. They've been to the tournament the last four out of five years, I believe. It wasn't that long ago they were in a Sweet 16.

This is a team that we certainly are not overlooking by any means. I've got so much respect for them and for their coach. So certainly, we felt like this was a very, very tough draw for the first round.

**Q. Going off of that, is this team similar to the teams that you faced when you were at Kansas City, or what did you see from this specific South Dakota State team?**

JACIE HOYT: Yeah, again, I think that about every team that goes through there is the same. They run the same stuff. They just have a great system.

As far as similarities, several of those players that were -- that we played against when I was in Kansas City are still on the team. They were freshmen and sophomores at that point in time. But yeah, I mean, same players, same system. They just continue to find ways to make it work and get better and better at it.

For example, I think Paige Meyer was a freshman when I was in Kansas City. I knew she was going to be special back then.

It's just so impressive the way they keep those kids there, the way that they all seem to just be bought into South Dakota State women's basketball.

There's a lot of familiarity.

**Q. Obviously, you've talked about the sisterhood and how this team wants to continue to play for one another. There's a lot of reasons why this team has been able to have the success, but one little-known secret may be what you've called the Juice Boys. What and who are the Juice Boys?**

JACIE HOYT: To be honest, I would say the Juice Boys are kind of our secret sauce. They've been a little weapon that we've had that probably should be talked about a little more. But the Juice Boys are our managers, and we call them the Juice Boys because they bring the juice. We actually got shirts made for them.

But it's their job just to bring the juice every day in practice, just give us a great look at the scout and what our opponent is going to be like. They bring the pregame hype for us before our games in the locker room, which I think everyone has come to really look forward to because it's gotten to be a pretty big deal. It's a pretty theatrical skit

that they do. It gets everyone excited. It keeps everyone loose.

We're all about joy in our program, and they certainly are a huge part of that. I really don't think that we have the season that we're having without them, to be honest. They're a huge part of what we do and how we do it.

I think that's really a testament to just our culture from top to bottom. Everyone is bought in. I've never had a group of managers that are as bought in as the Juice Boys. Yeah, we're really grateful for them.

**Q. You mentioned South Dakota State having girls that have watched the program forever and they've been to so many NCAA tournaments, their coach has been there forever. For you, it's your third year. As you continue to build your culture and your program, what can you take away from programs like that, that have built that foundation?**

JACIE HOYT: I think they're really great at just knowing what works for them and sticking to it. That's something that I am learning. From last year to this year, we've grown so much as a staff at just understanding what works, not just for us as a staff, but what fits at Oklahoma State. We're not for everyone, and we're okay with that. Everyone is not for us.

I think that they just do a really good job of that. They get the right type of kids that fit for them, and they do a good job of keeping them there. I would say that's definitely a program that I look up to in terms of that and what to model myself, and I think that we're on a really amazing path to do that right now.

**Q. On that topic, culture, obviously, this week and this tournament is about this team, about these amazing young ladies that have come together and played such an incredible season.**

When you talk about culture and moving forward, Lena Girardi has already been signed. That's a huge signing for you guys. You just gotta Amari Whiting, and she is the kid of another coach. I don't know that there could be a better compliment than a coach signing off on letting her kid go play for another coach. I think that speaks to the culture, as well. I know this week is about this week, but talk about the future of that and what that says about your program and your culture.

JACIE HOYT: Well, I just talked about finding the right kids for us, the kids that make sense for us, and the two players that you just mentioned, they fit like a glove. They are Cowgirls through and through, whether that is their

character -- I think a lot of that has to do with their upbringing. Amari, a coach's kid, she's tough, she's smart, she's gritty. Lena is a coach's kid, just of a baseball coach, right? But they both just have a really deep understanding of hard work, work ethic, what it means to be a great teammate, doing whatever it takes to help your team win. They're two incredibly competitive kids.

So, to follow up on what I was just saying about finding the right kids, getting the right kids to stay, yes, this week is certainly about this team that we've had this season, but I couldn't be more excited about our future.

We've got several kids that we fully intend on being here that are playing tomorrow, that will be playing in the upcoming seasons for us, and then you add on two kids like that, man, our future is bright, and I couldn't be more excited to add those two players and just continue to keep trending in an upward direction.

**Q. Not only do you get to play in the NCAA Tournament, but you get to come here to UConn and play in a building that so many great players have played in and culture of UConn. How excited are you and your team to have that opportunity?**

JACIE HOYT: Well, for me, I mean, I grew up on UConn, right? I think we're in the mecca of college women's basketball here. This is the type of place that dreams are made of. To get to be playing here in March, it's something we're really excited about.

In no way, shape or form are we thinking about UConn, to be honest. Obviously, it's going to be in the back of your mind, but we've got such a tough first-round game against South Dakota State, I know I'm not looking past them, and our kids aren't, either.

But to get to just be here and get to play on that floor where some of the greatest to ever play the game have played, it's really special, and we're going to soak it up and just enjoy such a unique experience.

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