

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

## South Dakota State Jackrabbits

**Aaron Johnston**

**Haleigh Timmer**

**Paige Meyer**

**Brooklyn Meyer**

Media Conference



**Q. What did you guys learn from past NCAA Tournament experiences that you can take into tomorrow's game?**

PAIGE MEYER: I think playing in these tournaments in the past, you're going to get everyone's best game. Everyone that's here has obviously done well throughout the season, so I think just kind of being confident in the work that we've put in all season to come out and play well tomorrow.

**Q. You have a coach who's won a lot of games, a lot of titles, who could have gone elsewhere. What's it mean to have him showing that loyalty to the program and stick around?**

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, it's meant a lot throughout the years to be able to play under Coach A.J. He's done a lot for this program and just to kind of have him stick through it all these years has meant a lot, and we've all enjoyed playing under him.

**Q. Paige, you're playing to keep playing. How much does that motivate you here?**

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, it motivates me a lot, being our last year playing together with this group. Just kind of taking in every moment that I can, enjoying every moment with them and seeing how long we can keep it rolling.

**Q. Now that you guys have had a week to -- now that you know your opponent, to look at the tape, what do you think it'll take to beat Oklahoma State tomorrow?**

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, I think doing the little things well, rebounding, knowing our matchups, knowing what to do in scout defense, and obviously playing confident on offense is also important, so I think just bringing all those little things to the game that is going to give us the edge against Oklahoma State is important.

**Q. What has been A.J.'s message throughout the course of the week?**

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, I think just working on the little things, making sure we're locked into the details of the

**Q. One of the things that Coach Jacie Hoyt from Oklahoma State was saying she loves about your program is that girls get invested in it when they're young and watch the team and then want to go there. I was curious if you guys watched the team growing up, and if you had any memories or anything that you remember from that.**

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, I think it's cool that we keep a lot of girls in the Midwest on our team and I think that draws our fans, too. Growing up, living in South Dakota, it's been cool to watch the program and then now be a part of it.

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, kind of the same. I grew up in Minnesota, but I was familiar with them when I was young and watched them a lot and knew early on it was kind of something I wanted to be a part of, so been blessed to be a part of this program now.

**Q. Brooklyn, last year in the tournament I think it was 17-3 or 20-3 or something in the first quarter, just a really bad start. How important is it to not let something like that happen again, come out and start strong tomorrow?**

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, we always try to have good starts. I feel like trying to get our energy up and get ready to play will be good tomorrow, and we're really excited to get the chance to come out here and play.



page, and kind of like Paige said, we're going to get their best game, and we have to be ready to play tomorrow, and yeah, just bring our energy and bring our effort.

**Q. What do you guys expect the atmosphere to be like on game day?**

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, UConn is obviously a really cool and historic place for women's basketball and their fans come and pack the arena. I think it'll be a cool atmosphere, just fans overflowing from their game before ours, so it'll be cool to play in this arena and this environment.

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, we're happy to be here. Another NCAA Tournament for our team. That's exciting. I think this is our 13th time. Not too many more years, so that's awful fun to have this kind of chance all the time. Fun to come to Connecticut, a place you know a lot about from their history and their storied program, so will be fun to compete in their arena. Obviously, a fan base that really knows women's basketball. Hopefully they're passionate about both games tomorrow and really just provide the environment that I think we want for all these young women that are out there playing.

We're excited to be here. We've had a great year. Fun to see our team play up to their full potential for all of the season, our non-conference schedule was incredibly difficult, came out with a lot of positives there, had a good run through our conference season and into the conference tournament, and been off for a little while, so been able to hopefully get a little healthy and get a little bit of rest, and now we're anxious to practice and play and go through the experience of it.

We've got some really good upperclassmen that have been great leaders for us. They've been a part of a lot of the success we've had over the years, so fun to see them rewarded again with another chance at an NCAA Tournament.

**Q. You've been coaching this team since it was a Division II program. To go from that to now, like you said, being in so many NCAA Tournaments, kind of expected to be here basically year after year, can you reflect on the journey?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, we've had this great, I think, growth and support for women's basketball over a lot of years. Obviously, the support and energy we're going to have here is unique and special. I think we feel back home the same way about our program. Fans really have been fantastic back in the early 2000s when we were kind of getting going and won a Division II national title through the

transition to Division I. Our first Division I victories and now building to a team that wants to be a top-25 consistently. That's quite a steep trajectory really in a pretty short period of time.

We've done it with great people. We've had so many good players over the years that have come to South Dakota State, stayed at South Dakota State, helped us build a tradition of success there, and this team is no different.

But it's been really fun to be a part of building something, and I don't want to say from scratch because the program was very, very good before I got there, but the Division I part was a whole new enterprise, something that we had never really done before, and to kind of take that to a new beginning to where it is right now is pretty amazing.

But it's been fun over the years to see it a little bit through our players' eyes, their families' eyes, through our fans' eyes, through our community's eyes, and it's touched a lot of people, I think, in a positive way.

**Q. Can we get a status update on Vasecka?**

AARON JOHNSTON: She's been good. She's been practicing. She'll be out there today. We would expect that she'd be available and ready to play kind of her normal role, normal minutes here going forward.

**Q. Last year in the NCAA Tournament, the start of the game was the maybe weirdest start to a game you've had. What do you remember about what happened, what went into that, and how can you avoid letting that happen again?**

AARON JOHNSTON: I remember all of our tournament games except for the start of that one, so I guess I can't really comment on it. I really don't have much of a recollection of being down -- I can't remember what we were down. No, it didn't go well.

You know, I'm a believer every game takes on its own life. That was a game where foul trouble hurt us. I think Brooklyn got two fouls immediately and we were kind of shocked a little bit from that and didn't put our best foot forward. But we hung in there, and I remember going into half and it was a game, from where you felt like, boy, this is going to get out of hand and our team just dug in and really played well to make it a game in the second half. That was a rough start. How do you avoid that? Like I said, some of that's in our control. We've got to be ready to play. I'm not sure we were then or weren't, but also just things come up in the game that change, even if you feel like you're ready when something doesn't go your way, how do you respond to it.

I think the lesson I would take either from that game or any of our NCAA Tournament experiences, you've just got to keep playing. You know, there's going to be runs one way or the other. Every team you play at this point is so confident and so good and so talented, not everything is going to go your way. You've got to be able to handle ups and downs in a game. Sometimes, you're playing an opposing crowd; sometimes, you're on a neutral floor, have to generate your own energy. There's just a lot of things that go into it. Just trying to be really steady and try and find a way to play the next best possession we can is a good way to approach it.

I do remember the start of that game, but try not to.

**Q. You guys have been playing really well here. Did you notice maybe a shift in focus of your team as you guys maybe hit the last couple weeks of conference play and then in the Summer League tournament?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I'd say even probably that midway through January, we started to dig in and prioritize and just play better defensively. We were always pretty good, but I think it's fair to say defensively, it wasn't a major issue, but I think we kind of found a new gear defensively the last, probably, six weeks of the conference season. I think that carried over into February and then into March. It helped our offense, too. We were far more efficient offensively. I thought we got to better spots there.

So defensively, that was probably the biggest change. I think as the year went on, the team really settled into roles and expectations, how can each person help us and where do they bring the most value to our team and people really buying into that. That's also an adjustment that every team goes through. Sometimes you hit it right away in November because of what your roster looks like. This year going back to the very beginning, I think I said this in September, October, we actually returned eight players who had been starters at SDSU this year because of injuries and all the different things that we've had to work through the last couple years.

When you have eight players back that all probably expect to start, obviously, that doesn't work that way math-wise, so we just had to adjust and we had to learn and figure out what the best system for us going forward was going to be.

I think all those things really fell into place as we got into about mid-January or so.

**Q. Can you talk about Kallie Theisen, her perseverance, being a sixth-year senior and also a leader and also being a Minnesota kid coming here**

**where Paige Bueckers plays?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, for sure. Kallie and Paige would have history for sure. They played in the same section and, unfortunately, Kallie missed out on some state tournaments because of Paige and what she did in high school. So there's a familiarity there that is a neat storyline. I think two people come from similar places and end up in different spots, but both in their own way having a story to tell and a story to write, which is really cool, I think.

Kallie's specific story, yeah, she has had so overcome some injuries. Unfortunately, she's had two season-ending injuries at different points throughout her career. She's a sixth-year senior for us. Most of the team would call her the mother, the parent of the team just because she has so much experience and has such a way about communicating and leading that draws people towards her.

But she's had to -- in a good way, she's really had to sit and think. These injuries have been tough ones. They're not minor ones. They're major rehabs. They've been two different injuries. Just had to think, what do I want out of basketball? What do I want to put into this? What am I getting out of this? Every young person has to think that, ask those questions, and she's had to do it twice throughout her career, and that's been really hard.

But I think coming through it now in this last year and having the impact she's had on our team as a player, but also as a leader, hopefully, she finds a lot of value in that, and I think she does. She's having a great year, been a big part of our success for a lot of years.

**Q. A.J., you mentioned at the onset about the non-conference portion of your schedule and the difficulty of scheduling the way you do, but what value that brings now where you're playing those successful ranked teams at the end of the year as much as you are at the beginning of the year?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, that non-conference schedule, I think, has been ranked anywhere between 10th and 15th in the country for most difficult non-conference schedule. That's what we can control. Those are the choices we get to make in November and December, who we play and what that's going to look like. We're really proud of that.

To have success in that schedule I think is really positive for us in a lot of ways, whether it's recruiting, retaining players, whether it's trying to set expectations, certainly, your preparation for what we have to face as we get further and further into the year. We've played some really, really

good teams, not just this year, but every year. I think that's always prepared us for trying to be at our very best when it really matters, which is now at the end of the season.

I think our team really likes those challenges. I know our fans do. We've had some great teams going through our building. It just has helped kind of promote and grow women's basketball in our area as well as got us in a place where we want to be confident coming into a tournament like this, and I think we can draw on a lot of those experiences.

Hopefully, as we go forward, the non-conference strength of schedule will continue to also impact and enhance postseason opportunities, whether it's seeds or bids or things like that. So there's a lot of value in it, and we take that part pretty seriously.

**Q. For Oklahoma State, J.T. Hoyt built that program up really quickly in three years. What have you been impressed with about her and on film what have you seen from impresses you about the program?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, she's done a great job there. We're familiar with her from her time in the Summit League, used to compete against her, so there's a history there, and Oklahoma State is in a great place. They play in a great conference that always has been supportive of women's basketball. This year, they finished third in that league and did it in a way that she's comfortable with. She's able to turn rosters over really quickly, have a balance of high school players, a balance of transfers and get them all moving in the right direction at the right time. They're a really talented offensive team. They all seem to shoot it. They can really spread you out. They really handle the ball. They do a good job of trying to create matchups that are good for them. Defensively, just really aggressive, put pressure on you.

Some of those things we saw from her teams at Kansas City. Now she's been able to do that at a different level in the Big 12 with maybe a different caliber of player, and her success at Oklahoma State is no surprise, and it's been fun to watch.

**Q. Playing these major teams, have you noticed a change in how they play you guys, being ready to play you guys, compared to maybe five to ten years ago when maybe it was a little bit of a surprise being a mid-major?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I mean, I think there could be some truth to that for sure. It's always hard for me to know what happens in the other locker room or the other gym for sure. But yeah, I think, hopefully, we've done enough over

the years where people aren't surprised by us anymore, and we're okay with that. It's kind of like the seeding for the NCAA Tournament; there's always a group of people that feel like there's an exact seed you want to try and get because that's the easiest path forward. I just want to be the very best seed we can be.

The path forward is the path. We've got to figure out a way to handle that and rise to those challenges, just like trying to win a game. You don't want to do it because someone overlooks you. You want their best games, and you want to see if your best game can stack up to theirs.

I think we're hopefully at that place. Again, I can't say what happens with the other teams. But if we are, I think that would be a good thing for us.

**Q. Just talking to Geno about you and him are two of the longest tenured coaches in the country at the same school. When you get to a place, do you just know it's your place, that this is where I belong? Is that why you've stayed in one place for so long, even with all the success you've had?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, it's been a great fit for me, but also for my family. There's a lot of things that go into these choices, at least for us. It's not always just about specifically the job or what the next job is or the pieces that make up a good job. There's a lot of things on the court that are important, but off the court that are really important, too. South Dakota State has been a great home and a great place to be for my family, our extended families.

When you watch our team compete, we have so many really, really good players. So what I just said about South Dakota State, I think resonates with a lot of players on our team, too. They feel that way.

We just haven't had players in the transfer portal very often. It's very rare for us.

It's just a place where I think we all try and figure out what's best for us and what gets us the most joy and excitement with what we're doing, and South Dakota State has been a great home for me, but also for so many players over the years, and that's why we've had the success that we've had.

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