

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - South Dakota State vs UConn

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

South Dakota State Jackrabbits

Aaron Johnston

Brooklyn Meyer

Haleigh Timmer

Media Conference



BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, I feel like I watched them a lot growing up, and I was a huge fan, yeah, especially when Breanna Stewart was here. She was one of my favorite players to watch. I feel like it's a really cool experience for us to be here and to just experience this environment.

Q. I'm sure you guys saw what happened in their game against Arkansas State the other day, and Arkansas State's coach said she thought what happened was they came in afraid, that they didn't believe they could win, that they were intimidated. How do you guys avoid that?

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, I think a good thing is, we have the first game jitters out of the way, and hopefully, we can avoid some of those first-game nerves and kind of just go in with a lot of confidence using the momentum we have from Oklahoma State.

Q. Brooklyn, one of those tough non-conference games was Texas, and you guys struggled in that game. How do you think you guys can learn from that game going into this one where you're playing another team that's better than the rest of the country?

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, I feel like going into Texas, we weren't probably quite ready for how fast they were going to play, and we weren't, I would say, ready to play.

I feel like just going into it tomorrow with that mindset, it's probably not going to be perfect, but just trying to play the best we can and putting our best game forward is really what we're focusing on.

Q. Is there anything specific you're focusing on, what you can do that needs to go right as far as, you did well rebounding yesterday? What are the focal points for the matchup with Connecticut?

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, I think one of the main things is how fast they play and how they push the ball in transition. So, taking away their transition game will be a huge part of what we do, and then, obviously, handling their offensive

Q. I asked you earlier in the week what it would be like to potentially play against UConn, and both of you said it would kind of be a dream come true. Now that that dream is kind of a reality, what are the thoughts and feelings bog into this game?

BROOKLYN MEYER: Yeah, we're super excited to have the opportunity to play another game in the NCAA Tournament and to play UConn. Yeah, it's just a great opportunity, and I feel like we're really excited for it.

HALEIGH TIMMER: Yeah, it's obviously a really cool environment, and to play in front of their fans will be a special experience, and I think we just have to view it as another game. And obviously, they have really good players and a really good program, but at the end of the day, we're going to scout them like usual and kind of just do what we can to win.

Q. You guys played a really tough non-conference schedule. How do you feel, like, playing those ranked teams, power conference teams, early in the year has prepared you to succeed in the tournament?

HALEIGH TIMMER: I think that's the cool part of being in a program like ours. We do schedule a really hard non-conference schedule, and I think that prepares us for postseason and games like this.

Q. On the topic of UConn, how much do you know about them as a program? Do you just know the name and the history? Did you ever watch them growing up? Did you ever know the players? How much do you know about this program?



threats.

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I'm excited to have a chance to play again. I think that's what everybody wants to do getting into an NCAA Tournament, is move on. This is our, obviously, 13th time being in the tournament, so kind of past the point of just the experience. You want to go in there, you want to do well, and you want to put your best foot forward. I thought it was a great win for us yesterday, just played against a very good Oklahoma State team, and I thought the second half showed a lot of just moxie, toughness, whatever, the things it took to win a close game, and now I know we'll take some momentum into tomorrow's game.

Obviously, Connecticut is fantastic in every facet, offensively, defensively. The history is impressive. I think everybody is aware of that. But tomorrow, we've got to find a way to go out there and play our best basketball, and that's what our focus has been here since the day started, and will be as we practice, and will be tomorrow, too.

I'm really looking forward to it. It's fun to be able to continue to play. Making it to the second round is incredibly hard to do. We've been fortunate to do it a couple times here, so we're going to enjoy that part of it, and I think that's a good thing. But we're also going to try and get focused on playing good basketball tomorrow, too.

Q. You guys play a really tough non-conference schedule every year. How do you feel like playing those games early on in the year helps you prepare for moments like this, going up against a team like UConn?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think so. I think this year, and every year, as you mentioned, is important. From -- I won't rattle off the teams we've played, but we played several teams who are a 1 seed, capable 1 seed, capable of winning national titles over the last several years, and I do think that that helps. It reminds you and reinforces how hard it is to play against those teams because of their talent and how well they execute and tomorrow will be no different.

But I think it helps us understand, okay, here's when we have struggles in those games, here's what's happening. When we have successes in those games, here's what's happening. So it gives us some focus on, here's how we have to try and play, here's the things that are going to be important for us to do well, and I think it helps.

I think it also helps coming here and playing -- our players enjoy -- you're trying to get better. You're trying to win games for sure. But when you go play some of these

teams on the road, they're fun experiences, and I think that's a big part of the overall experience we want to provide for our team.

Certainly, it's about winning, it's about moving our program forward, but it's also in those moments of trying to put the best experience possible for our students, too.

Q. Looking at your stats, you guys play a little bit more, 10 people instead of 8 from last year. How does that help keep players fresh? And when you need to change something in the game, maybe you have a few more people to throw out there and change the momentum a little bit?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, rotations every year are always different just based on injuries, who's available, things like that. So this year's team, it's worked out. We do have a lot of depth just because of things we've dealt with the past couple years. We've had several players returning this year who have been starters for us at some point in their career.

These NCAA games are a little bit different, too. You've got like four halftimes out there, it feels like, with every media time-out and everything else. You probably don't need to go as deep as we did during the regular season.

But if foul trouble or things come up or you just need a new hot hand out there, we have the ability to do that.

So I think we have the talent. We have the depth where we can really go into our bench and feel like it's really productive. But at the same time, we've got key players that really have to be on the floor and have to play well, too.

To have depth, you also have to have a team that's really willing to accept that, because we have several players on our team that probably could play bigger roles and just haven't always had that chance, and they're just really, really giving people. They've really bought into our plan and system. Depth is great. But it works when you have great people. A lot of depth when you have more individual thoughts sometimes isn't a great combination I would say.

Q. Aaron, are you going to talk about how big of a moment this could be for the team, playing UConn, NCAA Tournament, on ESPN, or do you want to just kind of treat it as any other game?

AARON JOHNSTON: Probably a little bit of both. I think our players understand the history of Connecticut women's basketball. I don't think I have to sell that to them. I think

they understand the interest that's going to be in this game in the arena, the interest that's going to be in the game being on ESPN. I don't know that I have to convince them that, hey, this is a big moment to everybody.

I think we'll focus on the basketball. But we'll do that in a way that I'm not sitting here trying to say we're going to minimize the importance of it, either. I think some of those things are obvious, and I think they should lean into that and enjoy that and experience that.

But as a coach and as a team, we've got to focus on the basketball because that's what's really going to count tomorrow, and it's really trying to play our best in that environment and against that kind of opponent. So that's where our focus will be.

As you go further, and I'm not saying the next couple of days, but as these women come back for an alumni event five, ten years from now, that's when they can go back and reflect on, hey, do you remember we played against so and so in that environment? And we've had a lot of those chances over the years, and this is going to be another one of those times that will be a great memory for them down the road and their families and everybody, which I think is cool.

I think that's a big part of college athletics and what brings people together.

But for now, in the short term, it's about trying to play really good basketball and do it in a really tough environment.

Q. I'm going to have a two-part question. I know you've addressed this a number of times, but looking at your schedule, I notice when you do play those power conference teams, they tend to be on the road. Can you talk about how hard it is for you to schedule, and have you tried to talk to Geno about getting Connecticut to go to South Dakota?

AARON JOHNSTON: I can't say that I've talked personally to them. I think our scheduling people have talked to their scheduling people about a couple different things. They obviously have a couple Midwestern players, and there could be a reason to do that at some point. It hasn't worked out, and I'm not saying there's a reason. It just hasn't worked out. I don't have the details even as to why.

Yeah, I think scheduling really good opponents is important. We've been really fortunate in women's basketball that we've had some great teams come to our home to play. You look over the years, Notre Dame has come to town. Oregon, when they were Final Four, Oregon has come to town. We'll have Texas come to our

place next year. Duke was there this year. I'm forgetting several. But there have been enough teams out there that do want to come and play.

I am guessing, I don't know from Connecticut's perspective, but they probably don't have a lot of teams lining up to play them in November and December. So finding teams that have that same challenge that we have -- because it is hard for us to get games, quite honestly. So finding some of those like-minded teams that are willing to travel and willing to play us is a challenge, but it's also important.

And that same challenge has led to bringing some of those great teams to SDSU. We'd be open to it. Maybe we can talk about it pregame tomorrow and see if it's on both of our minds and get our calendars out and try and pencil in a couple of dates maybe. We'll see.

Q. What would you say to convince them to do that?

AARON JOHNSTON: You know, I don't know that I would have to try and convince them. I think scheduling, they're either willing or they're not willing. We're certainly open to it, and I'm not just talking about Connecticut. I think it's a great thing to play against good teams. I really do. I really enjoy that part of it, enjoy the challenge of it because it is hard. I think it's great for women's basketball.

I know you're all familiar with your fan base and what that means. We've got a great fan base at SDSU, too, and they're equally as passionate about our program as your fans are about your program, or this program, I should say.

I just think it would be a great experience, and we're going to continue to try and find games like that. I think it means a lot to our team. It means a lot to the community, to our state, to the young people that are aspiring to be great at something when we get to see these people come to our arena.

So we'll keep working at it, and you can put in a few more plugs, too. That would be great.

Q. I know you and UConn have never played before, but you and Geno are two of the longest tenured coaches in the sport. Where do you see his biggest impact in this game?

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I mean, it's pretty broad when you look at what's happened just here with Connecticut, but then, you also look at USA Basketball. When you look at kind of what's happened with the professional game and the players who are elite in the professional level, I would say it's pretty broad. It's been a huge part of women's basketball for a long, long time, which is incredible.



There are several teams that have kind of runs where they have a couple of players that come through, but they just have a lot of those runs. That's really remarkable.

To have that many National Championships, to have been connected to that many gold medals and what that means, and then also have players who are continuing to elevate women's basketball professionally, that's pretty remarkable. It's sustainable. It impacts a lot of people in a positive way.

Some of that -- not all of it, but certainly some of that starts right here at Connecticut.

Q. When people talk about UConn, very often it's about their shooters and how easily they can score. But what impresses you about their defense, and why is it so difficult to play against?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think teams at that level, when you're talking about teams that are certainly in the hunt for National Championship, they all defend at a really high level, and they all have individual players that make offensive plays look simple and easy, and that often becomes the focus or what people spend most of their time talking about. But when you watch Connecticut defend, it is a connected group of people out there that make it really hard for you to be comfortable.

They have the ability to pressure you full court, they can pressure you in the half court. They've got size where they can block shots and challenge things. They rebound really well. And then, they just turn so many of those defensive possessions into quick offense.

Yeah, I think they've always been really good defensively. Watching them this year, certainly, they're at that level where they're an elite defensive team when they're really locked in.

Q. There's been some talk about expanding the tournament, but if you look at the first and second round games, you've probably had one of the more competitive ones, but a lot of them haven't been. Do you have an opinion on that, whether they should consider expanding or staying where they are?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, expansion. I don't know that I'm in the camp that says there has to be expansion with either the men's or the women's tournament, to be honest with you. I think it's making sure we're finding the right teams in there.

This year was a unique year. I think this was a year where

seeding was really, just, harder to predict. Usually, I think everyone on the outside can kind of pick where you think people are going to be, and they're usually within a spot or so. You might think maybe they're an 8, maybe they're a 9 or vice versa. This year, and this isn't a South Dakota State thing, it's just looking at the entire bracket thing. There are just teams I thought were maybe three, four off from where I thought they might have been.

I think these conferences now have gotten much bigger. I think there's just so much -- what's the right word? So much parity in the middle of those conferences that sometimes it's very hard to determine the difference between maybe a 6 and a 10 or an 11 from those leagues.

How does that then spill into mid-major bids, who need bids to get in.

This year I think was a really different year. Most years coming up to it, I felt you could predict, you could see. But this year was a tough one to really get, I think, just my head around why people were where they were.

Expansion, I don't have a strong opinion on that. I think it's in a good place where it's at. There are other postseason opportunities, too, for teams to play in outside of the NCAA Tournament who are right there, but I think it's really trying to figure out, from my perspective, what's going to go involved into the seeding, into the bid process.

As a 10 seed, I think we're a pretty good team, and I kind of felt like we'd be in the tournament regardless of what goes on in the conference tournament, but then you see yourself up there as a 10, and you're like, ooh, I'm glad we won our conference tournament. You're getting close to the end.

Just trying to understand that, I think for all coaches, so we can all plan and prepare and put ourselves in the best place possible. But I do think it was a little different this year, and we'll have to see if it's a one-off or if that's something that continues in the future.

Q. UConn has been this sort of national brand since you guys were in Division II. As you moved up, as you matured as a coach, as you built this program, in what ways did UConn influence you? Did Geno Auriemma influence you as you got to where you are?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I just think -- I'm someone that just really, in everything, having done this for a long time, just appreciates consistency of success. Like I said earlier, I think there are some teams that kind of peak and valley based on a couple of players, but I just have an unbelievable amount of respect for teams that can be there

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every single year. I just think that's really hard to do.

There are so many variables outside of our control that impact how our teams do, to see somebody at that level for that long is just really impressive.

It seems like, on the outside, just a connection from former players to the current program, too. I've always really appreciated that. I think we try and do that with our program. Our past players are incredibly involved and around and present in everything that we do. I think those are good, healthy signs of not only a positive experience, but people that really care deeply about their program.

I think I've appreciated those couple of things on the outside.

We talk about the success of Connecticut. Obviously, it has a lot to do with the wins, but even more impressive is just how few losses, which I know is saying the same thing in a different way. But over that period of time, I mean, they just don't lose, which I know turns into winning, but that's remarkable to think of it in the other perspective, I think.

Q. You've had a lot of success with Macy Miller as a player. What's it been like having her back as an assistant coach? What's been her impact since she's been here?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, Macy is great. For those that don't know her, she's an assistant coach on our team right now. Macy is our all-time leading scorer, one of the best to ever play in the state of South Dakota, certainly one of the best to play at the college level in our area. Macy was a part of a Sweet 16 run where we lost to Oregon out in Portland in, I thought, a contested game.

She's a great player, great coach. She understands our program, understands me as, I think, a good go-between with maybe me and some of the current players, just builds great relationships with them. Being from South Dakota, we have so many local players, too. She has that connection with them and kind of understands what it is to come from our area and play at South Dakota State.

Yeah, it's fun to have former players back. Macy is a good one. We sure enjoy having her on staff.

Q. How much do you think the first maybe five minutes tomorrow night is going to be important, handling emotion and the environment and stuff?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, probably just as important as the next 35 minutes. There's just going to be a lot of runs.

There's going to be some emotion. We've got to handle all of it. Early on in the game, to your point, is going to be important. We've got to go out and establish that we can play the way we want to play to build some confidence to get ourselves going. That's going to be true after that, too, because they just have the ability to put runs on teams, and we've got to handle that throughout.

But certainly, during the game, I think it'll be important to get some confidence, get some positive plays going in our direction and get everybody feeling comfortable.

Q. You touched on expansion and bringing Power Five teams out to play you guys. From a mid-major perspective, what are the challenges of putting together that resume that can get you a chance to get in the tournament? Obviously, you won your conference championship, but what are those challenges like?

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think they are challenges. That's a good way to say it. We can control our willingness in scheduling, but we can't control everybody else's. This year our non-conference schedule, so just our non-conference schedule, was somewhere between 15 and 10 most challenging non-conference schedules in the country, so that's pretty good. So I think we've had that recipe for a long time.

We have to be able to get people to do home-and-home, so we don't go into a lot of guaranteed games. So if we're going to into Texas, we expect them to come back, and same for everybody else. So we get some of those games at home, which is incredibly important for us. Played Duke really, really well at our place, a game that could have gone either way. We'll go back to Durham next year.

Kind of finding that level of game is really important, being able to win enough of those games, getting some of those neutral site games, the Thanksgiving or the trips where we've got Oregon and beat them out in Hawaii. We've had several of those over the year.

I think we can put that together. And in the past, that's always been a really good plan for us, but I come back to, again, really trying to understand how those things are going to be weighed when it comes time to either at-large bids or even seeding. This year, I don't know that I probably did understand it as well as I probably need to and hope to.

It's just being really clear on how that is going to shape in this new world of incredibly large conferences where those middle teams in particular get so much compression with their NET rankings and even -- one conference had, I think,

several teams that were all the exact same record, and they were seeded anywhere from 6 to 11, and I'm looking at them and trying to figure out -- I don't know what the difference is here.

So where do we fit into that group? Because I don't sit here and say we fit into the 1, 2, 3, 4 -- that's not what I'm talking about. But the other group of teams, how do we understand what we do in November and December and how it's going to impact us potentially in March.

That's tough because every year it's different. I understand that. It's a little bit of a moving target. But we need to understand that target as well as we can to put ourselves in the best spot.

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