

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

Monday, March 24, 2025

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

## South Dakota State Jackrabbits

## Coach Aaron Johnston

## Paige Meyer

## Kallie Theisen

### Media Conference

UConn 91, South Dakota State 57

THE MODERATOR: We'll open up with a statement from Coach.

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, you know, congratulations to Connecticut. I thought they played really well. Certainly they're playing at a high, high, high, high level. At times we were able to hang in there and other times we weren't. I thought their defensive pressure just got us out of rhythm and out of sync and they were able to score quite a bit in transition and quit a bit off our turnovers. But there were times in there where I was really pleased with how we played and I think our players would feel the same way.

Definitely been a great season for us, 30 wins is remarkable. Quite a few teams out there would love to trade places, a chance to play in the second round of the NCAA Tournament, get a big first-round win, compete against one of the nation's very best teams here tonight. Everything about it is something that I know I'm really proud of. I mentioned it the other day, there's no place I would rather be today and I still fellow that way now. I wish it was a different outcome but still to be able to compete on this stage with a great group of young women is exactly where I think we all want to be. I'm proud of them.

We say good-bye to four incredible seniors, just people who have meant a lot to our program over the years. Really happy for them and the experience they had as Jackrabbits and they're definitely going to be missed here as we go forward.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the



student-athletes first.

**Q. Hi, ladies. Can you spoke to the whole experience of playing here in the tournament in such an iconic building under the brought lights, what you two are going to take away from it?**

KALLIE THEISEN: Yeah, obviously really special to be playing in the tournament and to be playing here. I think we all grew up as little girls watching UConn play so it's special to get to play here, but I think I'm just going to take away the experience of getting to play with the people I love. The big win we had the other day was super fun and obviously today didn't go the way we wanted but just another game getting to play with my best friends definitely meant a lot and just the whole experience was really memorable.

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, like Kallie said, just getting the opportunity to play here. Basketball is big here so I think just having that opportunity to play here with, like Kallie said, the girls we love, so, yeah, it's a really great experience.

**Q. Paige, you guys got off to a pretty good start. How did you feel about how you came out ready the play and how did it start to get away from you?**

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, we came out with a good start. I think their pressure kind of got to us that second quarter, just some turnovers, too, that kind of led to some easy baskets for them. Yeah, they're a really great team. Wish we could have done some things a little differently but still proud of the effort that the team had out there.

**Q. This one is for both of you. When you guys were leaving the floor, you guys hugging each other on the sideline, what was that moment like for you and how much do your teammates mean to you as well?**

PAIGE MEYER: Yeah, being a Jackrabbit has been the best thing. Playing the last game with them all sunk in there. I just love this group so much. It's been a really special year and I'm just really going to miss being a Jackrabbit.



KALLIE THEISEN: Yeah same, obviously. The last six years have been really amazing and I think I'm just going to miss the people, like I said before, they're all my best friends and it's just been such a great experience getting to play with them and I wish we had practice tomorrow. I wish we could keep going but it's been a great year and a really great career in general, so, yeah, I'm going to miss them.

**Q. Kallie, what was it like inside tonight with how big and physical they were down low?**

KALLIE THEISEN: Yeah, for sure, they're really strong inside. Obviously they have great guards as well but they're super physical, super strong. They don't let you get anything easy so I think that was shown out there but I think we battled for most of the night, but wish we could have made a few more plays, obviously.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for the student-athletes? Thanks for your time.

We'll take questions for Coach.

**Q. You got off to a good start, like Matt said, and second quarter, what did you see where they went on a 16-2 run there and kind of pulled away.**

AARON JOHNSTON: I just think their defensive pressure just wears on you. Early in the game, I thought we were fresh. We were in a good place. Their pressure starts to wear on you. So not like physically you get worn down but a couple of mistakes, all of a sudden you lose a bit of your mental edge and it can turn into a run, which they did a good job of. You know, we made some shots, I thought, pretty well from the field but it was turnovers and points off of turnovers. You gotta find a way to be able to handle that kind of pressure better when you play teams like that.

To their credit, they don't make it easy. It's not like there's a simple way out of that. It's constant. They interchange who's pressuring the ball so they're staying a little more fresh and we put a lot on Paige to try to handle some of that and she did a great job, but we got to find a way to help our players be a little bit better in those situations too, because it's hard, hard to play against that kind of pressure in that kind of environment and when things don't go your way to be able to hang in there and be ready to make the next play. At times we did a good job with that. Other times we need to be a little bit better.

**Q. Obviously it's hard to play against Paige Bueckers on a normal night but she had a really good night tonight. Seemed like she really didn't miss many**

**shots. Just from your perspective, what were you seeing from her and what can you even do, really, when she's playing like that?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, she was special and she's certainly -- I always hate to compare and rank -- one of the very best players in the country and certainly will be a great professional. Yeah, I think we knew that. I don't know that we were surprised by it, but when someone that good gets to that level, it's really hard to slow them down. I thought our effort was good. She made a lot of tough pullup jumpers, made some shots behind screens. Just did things that are really hard to stop. They're kind of outside of a defensive plan, I thought, but her talent is exceptional and it really shined, I thought, here tonight.

**Q. The success that your team has had and also other mid-major conference teams like Richmond last night and there are just so many great players on these mid-majors. How important is it that these teams get noticed and get recognized?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Well, I think it's important from my perspective, being at one of those stations, I think it's important all good teams and good players get recognized. There were a lot of years that women's basketball was really carried or elevated by a couple programs and rightfully so. That was the way it was. Now it's gotten to be a little bit bigger and bigger and bigger and now you're seeing a lot of really exceptional programs and some mid-major programs that are very capable of competing in power four conferences. That doesn't mean I sit here today and say we're capable of beating one and two seeds consistently.

There's a big difference between being in one of those conferences and being good and having to compete against the very best. I think there are plenty of mid-major teams out there that could do that every single year. I'd like to think that we're one of them. You mentioned Richmond. There are several others out there this year too. It's hard. There's just -- watching the -- I didn't see all the games. I watched some of them today. There were just some lopsided scores today in the tournament, there were, and I think people are going to look at that and think, well, are they ready? Are they capable? Some of the teams I watched today we played at at some point -- I'm not going to mention... but we played at those places. It's just different today. Like we'd go to those places and play in front of 3,000 people. Now, Virginia Tech had their place sold out a couple years ago. It's just different now. Women's basketball is supported in a very, very different way and you give teams that are the top 16 teams and they get rolling at home, they're going to beat people. I'm not saying we shouldn't do it at host sites. Host sites are fine.



I don't have a problem with that. I'm just saying it's harder now than it was before. That's because the quality of teams across the board has gotten better, mid-majors included in that, I would say. I think we should all feel good about where women's basketball is at and the trajectory that it's on. I think those are really positive, positive things.

**Q. Is there a takeaway in this? You played South Carolina, you played Duke and now UConn. You struggled with some of those teams but at the same time, you're still trying to get better, right? You're not putting a ceiling on what you guys are trying to accomplish. Is there a takeaway from games like this?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think so. I'll tell you what I talked about with the team. One, I think in my mind as a coach, you're always trying to find ways to get better. We want to win these games. I can sit here and say that and that's a true statement. That is the goal. We have to find a way to continue to play better if we want to advance. I don't have any problem saying that.

At the same point, I mentioned to our players afterwards and they talked about it, I heard them say that a few times, as they were young girls, they grew up watching Connecticut. I reminded them that there are young girls at home watching them that want to be Jackrabbits. The takeaway is, yeah, we're going to figure out some basketball stuff and try to keep moving forward in our plan, but not to forget the impact that our women have on our communities and our state and our young people back home. I think that's an incredibly powerful statement to kind of be on the stage with a team that's certainly at a different level right now, both nationally, how they play and the impact they have but to remind our players they can have that same impact locally and that can be that light for somebody else and that's a really powerful message and one that I hope stays with them as they move on.

**Q. Aaron, can you give an outside perspective of what Connecticut does and the fact that this is 31 consecutive Sweet 16s and you know how hard it has to get there, for them to do it -- people here I think take it for granted. How about from the outside? When you see that, what do you feel?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I'm sure it didn't feel like the crowd took it for granted tonight. Seemed like they were pretty engaged and ready for a game, but to your point... there gets to be a certain expectation where this is just going to happen. If we get everybody in the gym and everything goes, we're just going to keep winning and the reality is that's not the case. I don't feel like that's ever the case for our team at our level when we win that it just happens and I'm sure it's not the case here at Connecticut

for that team. They played hard. I don't know that people realize -- and I think our team plays hard. I really do, but they have some of the best talent in the country and they play hard. They just don't take breaks. I don't know if people -- I hope they wouldn't take that for granted because that's probably one of the things that I appreciate from the outside about watching them and playing against them more than anything else. The talent is the talent. You have to deal with that. I've seen a lot of players and played against a lot of teams where talent will take some breaks from time to time, let you catch your breath, let you hang in there. Watching them and playing against them, there's just not a lot of breaks taken out there. I'm just really impressed with how hard they play and that's a big reason why they sustain that success year in and year out. They're good this year, really good this year. We've played again some other good teams and UConn is really good. They have to be the best two seed in the history of women's basketball. That's not to say they should be a one because I think there's some other really good teams out there but that speaks, again, to how good I think women's basketball is getting. There's just a lot of really good teams out there and what separate the ones that do it every single year is just how committed and driven they are and that team certainly is.

**Q. We've talked a lot about Paige this season, rightfully so, but just her career, the impact she's had on the program, can you kind of talk about that?**

AARON JOHNSTON: Yeah, I mentioned this before, but if you look at our senior class, and I never have looked it up, it's just not how I think about it, but their list of accomplishments has been remarkable and Paige is certainly a big part of that. She's been here four years, Kallie six years, Madi and Mesa five years, but Paige stepped on campus as a freshman and was a starter for us really day one and has been a huge part of our team as a player, as a leader, in our community. She's just been a focal point. That's always fun and exciting for people to see on the outside, but there's a lot of weight and pressure that goes with that too. I don't know if everybody always understands that, the expectations that Paige probably has for herself as we do and to be able to handle those things as well as she has.

She's been a part of a lot of wins for us, post-season, regular season, she's just a wonderful, wonderful young person and we're going to miss her a lot in a lot of ways as a Jackrabbit, but we're excited to see what she does. She has basketball in her mind here in the in the future. I think she's got -- maybe into coaching too, so it will be fun to see where she takes basketball after this too.

THE MODERATOR: We are out of time, Coach, thank you

so much.

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