

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - FGCU vs Oklahoma

Friday, March 22, 2024

Bloomington, Indiana, USA

Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall

Oklahoma Sooners
Jennie Baranczyk
Payton Verhulst
Skylar Vann

Media Conference



But a lot of our work has just been on us getting better and showcasing what we can do. So I think we're really excited to get started.

SKYLAR VANN: Kind of going off of that, like you said, they're a great three-point team. I think in this week of practice we had to really focus on being in our gaps, closing out, stay down. And really just guarding them because they can get to the paint too and they're a really smart team.

Like P said, this isn't their first time. So they also know what they're doing.

Q. You guys mentioned since last week in the semifinals there were a lot of things you worked on and implemented in your game. What was the biggest thing you worked on?

PAYTON VERHULST: I think the biggest thing is just team defense overall. I think it's something we've improved on this entire year and that we're going to keep improving on. I think, after our Iowa State game, that was something that we for sure wanted to start working on, and we did for the last week and a half.

SKYLAR VANN: She pretty much said it. Team defense was our key, what we really wanted to focus on. I feel like we've really grown in that aspect of the game this week.

Q. Skylar, I wanted to ask you about two years ago this was all new to you with the program making the NCAA Tournament. Now this is your third time through. How much have you grown, and how much is that experience going to help you, not only yourself play tomorrow, but with the others making their first appearance in the tournament?

SKYLAR VANN: Having this experience definitely does help. We've played on this stage before. But like we said, they've also played on this stage. So I feel like there's really no advantage in that.

I think, at the end of the day, it's just basketball, and it's

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall for the first round games of the NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Championships.

Oklahoma, congratulations on your at-large selection to the bracket.

On the dais, we are joined by forward Skylar Vann and guard Payton Verhulst. We will open it up for questions.

Q. I guess just to start us off, you guys are here now one day from the first round game. How are you guys feeling heading into that?

SKYLAR VANN: I feel like we're really excited. We had a week of anticipation, really being in the gym and just like really improving our game and playing as a team. So I think we're excited and ready to go.

THE MODERATOR: Payton, anything to add?

PAYTON VERHULST: No, I think she said it really well. We had a week from our conference tournament to now, so we had a lot of things we can improve on and we did. So we're just really excited to showcase that.

Q. What have you all kind of seen so far of FGCU, especially with the three-point shot that they're known for?

PAYTON VERHULST: We know that obviously FGCU is a great team and they're very familiar with the tournament. So we obviously had a lot of time to work on scouting them once Sunday's show came out.



fun, and that's why we're all here. So I think just play, have fun, and just enjoy it.

Q. Payton, I wanted to ask you about your experience. From afar what did you see about this program in the NCAA Tournament that helped you decide to come here? And what's this year been like getting here to this event, once again, helping them make their third straight appearance?

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, being able to watch them, especially watch Jennie coach, I was really excited because, kind of like Skylar said, it's just fun to play here. It's fun to play with this team, and I think we've built a really big chemistry throughout this entire year. So I think we're really excited to keep building on that.

Then going into this tournament, like I said, our chemistry has grown so much that I think that's only going to help us play.

Q. For both of you gals, Jennie, of course, is from Iowa. Iowa has been in the news for women's basketball in the last couple of years in a big way. Does she ever talk about her days with the Hawkeyes and give you any Iowa stories?

PAYTON VERHULST: (Laughter). Yeah, we had a little shootaround yesterday, and she's never the person to brag on herself, but it's just kind of fun to know about the history of all the teams that are in this tournament or that have been in this tournament.

So she kind of was just talking a little bit on the history of back when she played. I don't know, I just think it's interesting when you have a coach that's so knowledgeable on the sport and playing and coaching. I think it just makes it fun to be able to have conversations like that.

THE MODERATOR: Skylar, anything to add?

SKYLAR VANN: No, not really. I think P said it all.

Q. One quick question, follow up on this team you're playing. Like Skylar said, this is a team that is used to being here, and this is a team that likes to shoot the three. This is a team that's going to stretch you guys out. What stands out about the way this team plays and the matchup tomorrow?

SKYLAR VANN: I think what stands out is -- I mean, yeah, their ability to shoot, and I think just having five people that can all handle the ball, get to the basket.

We're going to have to be able to play together because there's not much -- like there's not really a post presence, but that means you've got to be able to guard and stay in front but also not allow them to shoot wide open threes.

So I think that's really going to just test our defense tomorrow.

Q. I'm curious, they shoot so many threes, similar to Iowa State in that sense, but it doesn't seem like they run anything like what Iowa State runs. What have you seen on film? Are they comparable to Iowa State at all, or is it just the three-point similarity?

PAYTON VERHULST: Yeah, we talked a little bit about it. Obviously Iowa State is a great three-point shooting team too, and so is FGCU. I think, kind of like Sky said, they don't have as much of an inside presence as Iowa State did. So I think our defensive game plan will change a little bit there.

We've played a lot of teams that are similar to this where everyone can shoot, everyone has the green light. So I think, like she said, this will be a really good testament to what we've been working on this week in practice.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you for your time. Have a great practice today.

Coach, welcome back to Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall for the first round of the 2024 NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Championship. Congratulations on your at-large selection to the bracket.

We will get started with an opening statement from Oklahoma Head Coach Jennie Baranczyk.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I'll tell you, the NCAA Tournament never gets old. So we are really excited to be here and very, very thankful.

Like I said, it's a little cooler here than it is in Oklahoma. Hopefully it's a little warmer in the gym.

Q. FGCU is a team that's comfortable with that 12 seed. They've had it the last two years. They've made it to the second round the last two years. How do you kind of adjust your mindset knowing that fact?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I think at this time of year it's always about the game that you bring anyway, right? So you know that your opponent's going to be a great opponent. No one's going in underestimating. No one wants to play Florida Gulf Coast ever.

Part of that is also my background and understanding, and we've also played some really good teams in the first round the last couple years. So this is not a team that's going to sneak up on us. We have high respect. We understand how good they are, and we have to be able to adjust.

Again, it's about how you come out and you play this time of year anyway. That's where our focus will be.

Q. What kind of stands out to you when you look at FGCU?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: What doesn't stand out, right? Honestly, I think that the history stands out. I think the way that they can stretch the floor stands out. It's a little bit different than what we've seen in the Big 12. So that's going to be a huge adjustment.

But they're a team -- they're not a Cinderella team. They're not a team that's sneaking up on anybody. They're not a team that's going to surprise anybody. They're a very, very talented team. He's done an incredible job for a long time.

So you know they're all versatile. You know they can all put the ball on the floor. You know they can all shoot the three. So it's just going to be a fun game for us.

Q. There were ups and downs this season for you guys between nonconference and conference play. How did you stay motivated, and what do you see as the biggest kind of -- where did you see that point change, from point A to point B?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: You know how many times I've been asked that question and how many times I usually hear a number of this is how many days you've lost, since you've lost to such and such a team.

But honestly, I feel like today adversity and growth isn't celebrated as much as wins and losses are, and I think this is a team that has really grown a lot. As much as you want to win every single game that you play, you still have to understand why you're playing, and it isn't always about playing to win a game. It's about playing in front of a mirror, falling down, getting up, looking in the mirror, taking ownership, taking responsibility, growing as a team. You got to hear our players talk about that earlier.

And you don't get to just manufacture that. We have so many outside resources now in terms of how you build a team. There's books, there's literature. But until you get in that space, you fall on your face, you roll up your sleeves together, you crawl forward, you sometimes fall back.

But when you're in a group, to me basketball is the greatest

sport because it's so intimate. There's nothing you can hide behind, but there's a lot of opinions. There's a lot of experts. There's a lot of outside voices that can tell you what you should be doing, what should be different, what coaches should be doing, what coaches should be doing different.

This was a group that decided to get together. This was a group that decided, you know what, instead of worrying about winning and losing, we're going to be addicted to growing. So we're just going to get better. We're still going to fall down. We're still going to make mistakes. But we're going to learn, and we're going to grow together.

That, to me, has probably been the best part about this team, but also this is a story for people to look at all over at any level. I have young kids that play, and I see at a young age that it's all about winning. We kind of forget how amazing this game is when you allow growth to happen.

Q. Maybe along the same lines there, you guys have been in playoff mode for the last couple weeks with the way that the host sites are selected and the top 16. Do you think that helps your team as you move now into the intensity of the NCAA Tournament?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I wish I knew. I don't know. I don't necessarily like how we came out in our conference tournament.

This is why you play. The NCAA Tournament, postseason basketball, this is what you do. I go back to even a few years ago -- and I can't believe it's already been four years since everything was shut down from a COVID standpoint -- but it was at that moment that I think all of us, especially in the position that I'm in, you realize how much this means to young people. They work their whole lives for these moments.

Sometimes we think, oh, it's just a sport, but it isn't. It's a lot more than that. So I think from that standpoint this is the best time of year, and it can bring out the best and the worst and everything in between. But you hold onto your team chemistry. You hold onto wanting to play together just one more minute, and that's it.

So that's what you hope, when you step out on the floor, that's what you hope you get to see. I still hope you get to see us play really hard and have fun and have a smile on our face and make sure we're high-fiving, we're pointing to each other because that to me is Oklahoma basketball.

Q. Jennie, your alma mater made a lot of women's basketball news the past couple years. Of course you played for Lisa. She's done a fantastic job. What did

you learn from her, what have you taken from her when you were building your program at Drake and now Oklahoma?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: One, I did not talk about my playing days yesterday. They asked me who was good in the Big Ten when I played and then decided to let me know how long ago it was that I did play. So I not only have my players telling me that, I have my own children that also say that, that ask me all the time if I was as good as Caitlin Clark. I say, yes, just a different time, but that's not true at all.

I love the way the game is being elevated. I feel like Lisa Bluder does an incredible job of leading with humility. Obviously she has a superstar on her team in Caitlin, and I think Caitlin has become a household name, and I think that's through obviously her success but also through the NIL platform as well because I think that's what's really helping elevate the game.

At the same time, 20 years ago when I did play here, they didn't have the fans that they do now here at Indiana. So you look at what the sport of women's basketball has continued to do is just elevate on a national level. So I've been really impressed from a fan-based standpoint to be able to see the number of people that are falling in love with this sport. One person can bring them to the sport, but it takes that team, it takes that community to really get behind to elevate where we're at.

Again, going back to your question about Lisa, I think she does a great job of leading with humility. I think she does a great job of giving the players on her team the keys. That's something that I've really taken away and really loved playing for her.

Q. Jennie, I have a two-part question for you. The first question is I wanted to ask you about just the time span. This is only going to be your third game in three weeks. Is that a good thing or a bad thing for the program? Secondly, kind of a fun question, Jordi became a viral sensation last year. How excited is she for this tournament? Has anything changed? Does she still have the passion she showed last year in the tournament?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: If you saw her crying at the conference tournament, yes, that hasn't changed.

To answer your first question, coaches love practice. So this is the first time that I have ever had, as a head coach, a whole week in between the selection and the conference tournament. Normally we've had the conference tournament that weekend right before, you find out who

you play, you stay in that game prep mode.

So it was really nice for us to go back and have a week where you literally can't really focus on an opponent because you don't know who you're going to get to play. So you get to focus on all the things you want to work on.

Players love games a lot more than they necessarily love practice. So I don't know. There's still going to be some rust that comes off. There's a difference of being in that game shape, and you can only do so much from a practice standpoint to really emphasize that.

I'm hoping that that will be great for us. It will take probably a little bit. But at some point it becomes about the game, so we'll get there.

As far as my daughter, that moment really probably opened my eyes to children of coaches because -- and especially moms, and I know there's a lot of us out there, but there are also not a lot of us out there that are moms in coaching. You kind of sometimes don't realize that it's not your job, it's your whole family's job, and it's a lifestyle.

So I never want to take away that passion. I love the passion. I love how invested they are, and it's not just Jordi. Even our youngest, she hasn't really advanced much past the concession stand, but a little bit. She cares now, or she'll at least ask if we won or lost. My son blames the refs after every game no matter what.

But I love the passion that they have. I love the investment that they have. I think it just gives you a glimpse into really what a coach's kid's life is really all about.

Q. Coach, looking at getting ready for this game at Florida Gulf Coast, I was looking at the positions. Every single player is listed as a shooter. Not a guard or a forward or a center, but a shooter.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: That's because they shoot.

Q. Exactly. And they've shot almost 200 more threes than you have, and you shoot a lot of threes. What kind of unique challenge is this? This seems like Iowa State times ten in terms of three-point shooting.

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I think that's probably the Big 12 reference point is playing against an Iowa State who can shoot the ball really well. Again, it provides a lot of challenge, but Portland provided us a lot of challenge. IUPUI provided us a lot of challenge a year ago. And I know Drake provides a lot of people challenges.

When you're looking at this game, there's going to be some



kind of a challenge. So it will. It will really stretch our defense. We have to think completely different than we have, especially in the last few weeks where we've really played dominant inside presence players. So that is something that we will have to adjust. You can't just sit in the paint. You have to guard everybody, and everybody has to guard.

From that standpoint, of course there's going to be a challenge. But it's the NCAA Tournament, there's supposed to be challenge. You look at upsets constantly. The men's tournament started yesterday, today the women's tournament starts. People's brackets are already broken. That's what this is all about. You've got to show up, you've got to play, and you have to take on any and every challenge.

Q. Jennie, you just touched on it a little bit, but do you feel like there's benefit, when you are playing on Saturday, the girls can see the madness unfolding and kind of settle in a little bit instead of playing day 1 of the tournament?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I've been part of both, so I don't know. I think there's just an excitement anyway. But I do think it's been fun to be able to watch our team talking about it and everybody's got a different game on their phone. They're watching, whether it's the -- any kind of postseason games.

Especially with the women's side adding another tournament this year, those have been great games as well, and there's been access to be able to see it. I love the fact that our game continues to grow and there's access to see every game. That hasn't always been the case.

The interesting part is that our women don't know any different, and I love that.

Q. When I went back and looked at Iowa's attendance figures over the years, and this didn't -- they've exploded with Caitlin Clark, but they'd really built it up before Caitlin. Does that give you confidence that you can do the same even if, hopefully you get a superstar, but that you can build the interest without some sort of cultural icon coming around?

JENNIE BARANCZYK: I'm going to answer that in a couple different ways. One, the state of Iowa has always been very supportive of women's sports and women's basketball in particular. The high school games are covered. The girls' high school state tournament outdrew the boys' high school state tournament. I grew up in a way that it mattered. People cared about the sport of women's

basketball and supported the sport.

So, yes, this is an instance that Caitlin probably picked the right place to be able to stay home because people already had that desire and care for the sport of women's basketball.

When I left Drake, I knew it would take me a lot to leave. Attendance has always been and building your fan involvement has always been a huge passion of mine, and I wasn't going to ever go anywhere that I didn't think we could build something.

Now, understand, to me the way that you build it is grass roots. We're part of it. So I looked at Oklahoma and you look at the way that at Oklahoma you look at what our softball program has done from a national perspective, the World Series is in Oklahoma City, so you see women's sports held to very high regard.

You look at women's gymnastics and what they have been able to do from a national perspective and knowing what they've been able to do from an attendance standpoint.

So to me in looking at Oklahoma, I 100 percent believe that we will continue to build the fan involvement, the fan numbers that I feel like we're very capable of doing.

I know it wasn't long ago playing at Oklahoma, you didn't want to play there. You never wanted to play because you knew that there were going to be a lot of fans and fan involvement. I'm not saying we want people to come and sit in a seat. We're talking about people being part of the success that we want.

So I really do have the, if you build it, they will come. We're going to continue to build a fan base that is part of what we're doing, and therefore, people will start to come. Not the fans will come. We're going to build this, and the players will continue to come. So I feel like our fans are very engaged. I feel like we have very passionate fans. We just continue to need more of them, and I think more and more people are continuing to come every year that we've been here.

But, yes, if there was not a belief in that, I would not be here.

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