

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

Friday, March 22, 2024

Bloomington, Indiana, USA

Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall

FGCU Eagles

Coach Karl Smesko

Dolly Cairns

Uju Ezeudu

Media Conference



game. They like to get up and down. They have some really good shooters, we do as well. So who can shoot it better and who can defend in conversion better.

UJU EZUDU: It'll be a fast, fun game, so pretty exciting I think.

Q. I know ya'll are back in the same position the last two years, 12 seed with success, being able to surprise some people. What's kind of that mindset you have that you've been in this position before and be able to try to do this again?

UJU EZUDU: Yeah, I think just as a program we're undervalued when it comes to tournament season so we just have to continue to improve ourselves. We know who we are and Coach Smesko knows who we are, so just come out and show ourselves, show what we can do.

DOLLY CAIRNS: I would just say obviously FGCU has a very high standard. With this being my first year here, we're hoping to live up to that expectation tomorrow.

Q. Positions have become kind of a different thing in all sports nowadays. How much confidence does it give you that everyone on your roster is labeled a shooter rather than a traditional position?

UJU EZUDU: Well, Coach says all the time it's our responsibility to be a shooter. That label is -- anyone can be labeled as a shooter, but we go in every day from the summer, we've worked on preparing, being done, finishing our shots, holding our shots.

So we don't all just say that we are. We present and act like we are shooters.

DOLLY CAIRNS: I would agree. Coach Smesko does a good job holding us accountable to that label as a shooter.

Q. This building is very historic for Indiana's program. When you guys stepped here, I know obviously you will be practicing later, but do you feel any extra weight here in Assembly Hall?

Q. Dolly, start with you. You guys are officially here in Bloomington. What is this entire experience like now that you know you are in the Hoosier state?

DOLLY CAIRNS: Yeah, it's awesome. Really exciting. Really happy to be here. Really looking forward to tomorrow.

UJU EZUDU: First I want to say my name is Uju Ezeudu. Yeah, same as dolly. Excited to be here. Excited to practice today for tomorrow.

Q. Uju, you've done this before and are now the veteran leader. Have you seen yourself step up in any different ways this week to get some of the newcomers like Dolly or other transfers up on like the NCAA tournament level I guess?

UJU EZUDU: I think I've been asked a lot of questions that probably don't relate to the game, like timing stuff.

But I think overall my role has been different overall this whole year in comparison to last year. Just excited for them to experience it. I think it's a great experience for everyone to go through. As an athlete, it's what we work for, to get here.

So lots of just random questions, but it's been fun.

Q. For both of you, just what have you seen out of Oklahoma so far? What can they present to you all tomorrow?

DOLLY CAIRNS: I think we can expect a pretty fast paced



UJU EZUDU: No.

DOLLY CAIRNS: I don't either, to be honest.

Q. I like that. As for preparations, does anything change in your routine and schedule this week compared to any time in ASUN?

UJU EZUDU: No. I think Smesko is one of the probably best game planners as a coach in the country, he really prepares us, so it's all about us going out and executing the game plan.

For every team, we never underestimate anybody, so just about how prepared we are and how we showcase ourselves.

DOLLY CAIRNS: I would agree with that.

Q. I guess just for either of you, as women's basketball is gaining more and more transaction every year and getting more of that attention, Assembly Hall is a place that has averaged more than 10,000 fans a game this year. How cool it is for you to be able to play in those environments in a tournament setting, whether here or elsewhere?

UJU EZUDU: I love the transaction that women's basketball has garnered the past year and a half, two years. I love the amount of people who come out. I think FDCU has a good crowd as well. We have a lot of loyal fans. We play in front of some big crowds this year as well.

So just excited for the fans that are going to be out tomorrow.

DOLLY CAIRNS: Yeah, I think it's awesome. It's an awesome opportunity and hoping we can take advantage of it tomorrow.

Q. You guys have been battle-tested this season. Undefeated through conference play and going up against the likes of Iowa and North Carolina. What are some experiences you gained against those teams that you feel can help you in this region here?

UJU EZUDU: Yeah, I do think playing against those teams, a lot of Power 5 conferences, have prepared us for this moment. Smesko does a really good job and all our coaches as well do a really good job preparing us for pre-season and putting, again, a good non-conference schedule.

Playing against Iowa, North Carolina, Kentucky, as well, these are games that prepared us for this opponent. I'm

glad we were able to play those games early in the season and see what that competition is like. It's not like we're shy of the moment.

DOLLY CAIRNS: It comes down to our preparedness and game plan overall and executing the game plan.

KARL SMESKO: We're excited to be here. We know we're playing a great team, Big XII champion. We been preparing hard all week. Things have been going well. We're looking forward to good practice today and playing well tomorrow.

Q. You've obviously been here in this spot quite a few times before. What changes from the regular season to the NCAA tournament in preparation?

KARL SMESKO: Well, I think everybody gets even more locked in. They know that once you get to this point, you have to win to move on. You want to keep playing as long as you can, so every possession becomes magnified.

Knowing the game plan and personnel and all those things, it becomes magnified.

This is a time of year where you don't have worry about the players being focused on what you're doing. They're locked in and they want to look good on a big stage, and I think that we'll play well.

Q. We've been here for some press conferences throughout the day. This is the most packed I've soon this room with blue and green specifically. What is it mean to you to see so much or so many FGCU fans and supporters travel up here?

KARL SMESKO: We have great supporters. We have loyal supporters. We have people that have contributed to the program for many, many years. That's one of the reasons we have been able to have the continued success we have.

It couldn't be done without some outside help and it's good to have everybody here supporting us. Hopefully we'll do what we hope to do tomorrow.

Q. So many new faces on the roster who this is their first tournament appearance. Now that ya'll are here and they're kind of seeing the March Madness everywhere, it's your message to them in terms of handling everything that this brings?

KARL SMESKO: Well, I mean, we don't do anything extra special at this time. It's the -- we keep things very similar. So we're doing film sessions. We're doing our practice

plans in a very similar way.

The reason we do it is because we feel like it's the best way to prepare to win a game. We wouldn't change it for the most important game.

I think that that continuity puts everybody at a little more ease. Everybody is aware of the stakes. It's a little different situation for us. We go through the second hereafter of the season for months where we're a heavy favorite in every game we play.

Now we get to that point and roles get reversed a little bit. You know, we get to have a little bit of the underdog role. We're embracing it.

Q. What excites you guys the most in terms of embracing it?

KARL SMESKO: Well, we feel like we have a really good program, and, you know, a lot of times we -- a lot of teams come here and they're just happy to be here, but that's never been our mindset.

We have always come here with the thought that we expect to win and we want to keep moving on. Now, we know that we have to play very well because we're playing a great team.

But that's what we're preparing to do. We want to play at that level tomorrow.

Q. What stands out the most from Oklahoma?

KARL SMESKO: Wow, there is a lot of things. They're extraordinarily well-coached. You know, their players play to their strengths. They know their teammates' strengths. They share the ball as well as anybody in the country.

And they push the ball and push the pace as well as anybody in the country. So they have some things that they're like just top of the top when it comes to executing their offense, conversion.

So this is a game where everybody has to be ready. We're going to have a lot of people coming in and out of the game. Everybody is going to have to know their responsibilities and we're going to have to perform them at a very high level.

Q. With you having been here before, three times you've had the 12 seed, made it the second round. How much do you really like that helps your players' confidence tomorrow knowing that?

KARL SMESKO: Well, I haven't asked them, but we have players that played on last year's team who were part of the win. Madeline Antonucci hasn't played recently, but was a big part of last year's win, and so was Kierra Adams and Uju. I'm sure our new players are leaning on them. They have a positive experience in the NCAA that they can relate to our players who haven't had that experience yet.

So I haven't noticed anybody on edge yet. Everybody seems to be just focused on what we're doing and we been getting a little better each day.

Q. It seems when you get to the tournament and you see these Power 5 schools the size advantage a much greater than the ASUN. Last year specifically against Washington State you may have won the rebounding battle, how do you go about game planning for a much taller team, especially when it comes to the paint and rebounding?

KARL SMESKO: Well it's going to take a team effort. Like they crash the boards extraordinarily hard. If they can't run around you they'll be physical and try to push you under the basket. You can't be looking for calls. You just got to be tough.

You're going to have to act as fast as they act on the shot and then you're fighting for position, and then on their shot we're going to need all five people going after the ball. Nobody gets to take a break during that time.

But that's definitely a big key to the game. They crash the boards hard. For us to have a chance we got to do a good job limiting their second opportunities.

Q. Early season tests on your schedule probably got you ready for this point. Then you also had to get through your conference and your conference tournament to get here. What does that say about maybe how your team is set up to maybe take on some of those raucous crowds as you move through the tournament?

KARL SMESKO: We always like to play a tough non-conference schedule and usually highly ranked in the top 30 in the nation as far as non-conference schedule strength.

We played two of the No. 1 seeds in this tournament. We played Duke at Duke. We played North Carolina who won today. Fortunately we were able to win that game.

So we've seen some of the size and speed that some of the Power 5 conferences have. I think each time you see it, you are a little better prepared to face it the next time.

Q. I'm not sure how often you're on Twitter these days, but Coach Lyles gave a huge shoutout through a thread the other day. By the smirk you may have seen it. But throughout this entire process you've always made sure to kind of deflect the accolades to your assistant coaches. They're all homegrown. All but one played here at FGCU. How special is that for you now coaching with players you coached and how have you seen that unit help this year's push and even the past couple years?

KARL SMESKO: Well, we definitely have a coaching team. Like we work well together. We communicate with one another. We enjoy being around each other. We all love basketball.

Everybody is committed to making the student-athlete experience a positive one. They really do put our players first. We an amazing coaching staff, and I get plenty of credit. Like the people that are doing the work every day often get overlooked and they shouldn't. They're making sure that everything goes smoothly. Helping make sure we get the next player that's going to help us win another championship.

So you know, that was really nice of Chelsea Lyles to do that. Although she knows that I wouldn't want her to do that. I mean, to me she's probably the best assistant coach in the country. She has had every bit impact anybody else has on our success and how it's continued.

Q. Coach, Uju and Dolly sat up there and spoke confidently a couple minutes ago. How does maybe their confidence rub off on you as a coach or maybe rub off on the locker room?

KARL SMESKO: I have a lot of confidence in our team. I believe in our players. We have really talented players. They have a really good chemistry together. They enjoy playing with one another. They love one another.

I think that that carries over to their desire to be there for one another on the court.

So we're going to go into it with some confidence. We know we're capable of playing well. As I said earlier, we know it's required. There is no winning this game without playing great.

We do have players that are capable of that. We'll have one practice and see how we play tomorrow.

Q. Seeing the folks sitting in this room to support this program, for 22 years what has made Florida Gulf

Coast the place for you and maybe one of the better kept secrets in women's basketball?

KARL SMESKO: Florida Gulf Coast is a great university and Southwest Florida is a great place to live. That's one of the reasons we have been able to attract so many great players and assistant coaches to our program. Our university values what athletics with bring to a university so they've helped get us the resources to be competitive.

That challenge keeps growing every year to stay competitive, but everybody is working to go to make it possible for our players to enjoy experiences like this weekend.

Q. My last question is this: You've been doing it for 22 years. Positions have changed on the floor since you started doing it. When did shooter become the way you listed all your players? What went into that decision?

KARL SMESKO: Well, it was just this year where we decided just to label everybody that. I can remember back when even before FGCU I was at Walsh and we went to the national championship game. They had you fill out by hand your starters and I listed everybody as guards, and we had tournament organizers come to me and say, you can't start five guards.

I'm like, there is actually no rule against it. It was just so uncommon that anybody would think that way. Two guards, two forwards, a center.

And then I was being asked about players' positions this year and I'm like, we don't even have these positions that are being listed. Why don't we just call everybody a shooter and we'll let our players know that that's not really your position. It's your responsibility.

Like you're going to work on your skills and work on your craft so that you can become a good shooter in this program. So there is no real positions anyway. Some of our bigger, stronger players guard bigger, stronger players.

But that's pretty much the extent of it.

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