

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Bloomington, Indiana, USA

Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall

## FGCU Eagles

## Karl Smesko

## Brylee Bartram

## Emani Jefferson

### Media Conference



leave here with or that you'll have from the season?

BRYLEE BARTRAM: We're going to have a lot of memories. We accomplished a lot. We are all close on and off the floor, so we have a lot of friendships that we're going to take with us and basketball memories, two championships, NCAA tournament. So we have a lot to be proud of and a lot to take with us wherever everybody's on to next.

**Q. You obviously have made some stops before you got to FGCU now. With your Eagles career over, what does FGCU mean for you?**

BRYLEE BARTRAM: It means everything. I had an opportunity to come down here and play for Coach Smesko and for this program, who is really -- you know, we've made a name for ourselves. That's not by accident, so having this opportunity and playing in March and all of this is -- I'm really happy that I got to be able to do that and I don't regret a single thing.

**Q. You guys obviously got out of the gates really hot. What changed from the first quarter to the second and then ultimately into the second half?**

EMANI JEFFERSON: I would say our pace. We wasn't playing with the same intensity as we started with. We kind of got comfortable and that's where the mistake was.

**Q. A follow-up, a number of fifth-year seniors and folks that have exhausted eligibility are going to be moving on from this team this year, but the precedent is set for FGCU. Where do you see this program moving forward with the younger players that now have to step in and maybe fill some of those roles?**

BRYLEE BARTRAM: I think we have the same expectation as always. We lost all five starters last year and lost starters the year before. Coach does a really good job of taking whoever is here and bringing the best out of everybody. Everyone's just going to do it the FGCU way and the goal is always to be here. It will be the same thing. It won't change.

Oklahoma - 73, Florida Gulf Coast - 70

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

KARL SMESKO: Obviously a tough game, painful right now, but I'm really proud of our team. They gave great effort. This is the Big-12 champion and we took them to the very last shot and last bounce of the ball. I couldn't be any more proud of 'em if they won. They did everything that they could to try to represent FGCU and our conference well and I'm just really proud of 'em.

THE MODERATOR: We will take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Obviously not the outcome you all wanted, but down the stretch, that's exactly what March is about, a finish like that. Coming back down, what was kind of the mindset of the team down the stretch there?**

BRYLEE BARTRAM: We wanted to win. We knew that it was something that we could do and we were all locked in. It didn't end how we wanted, but like Coach said, we put up a fight and we did, we laid it all out there.

EMANI JEFFERSON: We went in, we fought hard, we played for each other, and we was just there for each other and we gave it all we had.

**Q. Now for both of you to look back on this season, a lot to be proud of, what do you think the legacy of this team is and kind of some of the memories that you'll**



**Q. Along the same lines, what do you guys do as the older leaders on the team now to carry the team forward maybe into next season?**

EMANI JEFFERSON: Just get everybody on board and just listen to what Coach Smesko has for us and just buy in.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

**Q. You've obviously had a lot of successful seasons. What stands out about this year?**

KARL SMESKO: Every year is special. You have different people involved and to see this team come together and just be excellent teammates to one another. I mean, that's what's going to stand out to me, is that every day they enjoyed being around each other, they worked for each other, and they played great for most of the season.

**Q. From your perspective, what changed from that hot start into the second quarter, second half, and when they ultimately took the lead?**

KARL SMESKO: Well, I mean, Oklahoma's really good. They were doing a good job guarding our ball screens and they were -- they ramped up the intensity defensively. We didn't get the same quality of shot in the second quarter as we did in the first. So when you're playing a team like Oklahoma, they're going to make runs at some point during the game. You just have to manage it and hopefully you can have your own runs and come out on top at the end and it looked like we had a chance to do that for quite a bit, but just couldn't close it out.

**Q. Just what was the message to the girls in the locker room after a successful season? Obviously a hard-fought game tonight.**

KARL SMESKO: I just told 'em that I know that it hurts because I'm hurting right now. We wanted to be preparing for another game and having an opportunity to go to a Sweet 16. But I just told 'em that I was really proud of 'em. People dream of the season that we had this year, to get this opportunity, to win multiple championships. Yeah, I'm really, really proud of 'em. That's all.

**Q. Walk us through those two looks that you guys had that were pretty good looks?**

KARL SMESKO: At the end? Well, actually the first play I called a 30-second timeout, probably should have called a full timeout, because we had to go over the play quickly and we didn't quite run it right. Might have been better to

call a timeout earlier and set something else up, but we let it play out a little bit. And then we'll have to look at the shot to see, you know, what we got out of that. But the last shot, it kind of worked out the way we wanted it. We knew they were going to be matched up and guarding things low, so we thought we would get, be able to free somebody up high on the three-point line and at least give us a fighting chance to put the thing into overtime and Uju is a great shooter, she had great lock, and for a second I thought we were going to get one of those amazing bounces, but, unfortunately, it bounced out.

**Q. There's obviously a good amount of upperclassmen on this team that have exhausted their eligibility, Brylee, Uju, Kiki Adams has been here for five years. When you think about this class, this year's class, what stands out and what will you remember about them?**

KARL SMESKO: Well, I'll remember things about each individual player. I just appreciate that they took a chance on FGCU when they were, well, Kiki came as a freshman, but everybody else came as transfers, and they came in and wanted to be part of something special. They didn't want anything handed to 'em, they wanted to earn it. Each of 'em have had great moments as an FGCU Eagle and I love all of 'em. I think they will all be successful going forward and I think they will all stay really close to the program.

**Q. This pod had four really talented teams, two undefeated conference champions and two Power Five at large bids. What does it show the growth of women's basketball around the country to have that much talent here in one pod and even in other pods around the country?**

KARL SMESKO: Yeah, women's basketball is growing and it's nice to see that everybody's starting to notice it. Once people watch it, they get an appreciation for it, because the players are extraordinarily talented. I think this is just the start of a women's basketball boom. I mean, there's so many amazing young players in the NCAA right now, and people are going to know these players as household names and they're going to be must-see TV. So I always thought this day would come, but I think everybody sees it now, what women's basketball's about to become.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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