

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Eastern Washington vs Oregon State

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Corvallis, Oregon, USA

Gill Coliseum

## Oregon State Beavers

## Scott Rueck

### Media Conference



For me as a coach, I've had lots of experience with young teams in big moments, and I've had success and I've -- that's how I coach. I don't feel it. Not anymore. I'm sure I used to but the reason I'm sitting here is because of the National Championship with ten true freshman, at Division III but still they had not been there. It's, let's go play and have fun and enjoy the moment.

You know, the lights are brighter. The gym, Gill, looks different. There's banners up and different things but the reality is, this team is just filled with true competitors that want to win, and so you know, so I anticipate we'll take it in stride and just roll on like we have and play well.

**Q. Coach talked a lot about treating every game like you're playing South Carolina, from a coach's perspective, how do you approach that when something like the scouting report changes with every opponent you play, continuing that mindset?**

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, we talk about possession by possession, being elite. We don't care who it's against. But certainly it changes game plan and you know, the things that you're going, but that statement just means we respect everyone. Obviously if you mention South Carolina, they are the overall 1-seed. So that's the team that commands the most respect.

So if you're treating everyone like that, then everyone is going to bet your best, and I think that's a lot of wisdom in that approach right there and I think that's what this team has done all year. There's been very little dip in effort or focus as the year has gone on. It's been a very high level of performance night-in and night-out and that's why we're sitting here. I think this team has demonstrated that and it comes from that mindset.

**Q. You guys have played in a lot of big games this season but a lot of the players on this team have not played in a setting or atmosphere like this. What's the message or what has been the message this week to the team as they get ready to kick off for many of them, their first time playing in the March Madness Tournament?**

SCOTT RUECK: I think today is just, you know, this weekend, I guess, is just an exciting time for everyone.

I'm just so proud of this team and the way they have conducted themselves all year and to have them earn the right to be at home to start the NCAA Tournament this year is what everybody hoped at the beginning of the season, and it's just been a joy to watch it happen.

So that's just my feeling. I'm just happy for Beaver Nation that's supported us at the highest level and happy for this team, to create an opportunity like this. So we are looking forward to getting that started.

**Q. You have Talia on this roster who was in the bubble but that was a weird year for her, she talked about, just because she joined midway through and the only other player on this team with tournament, with other players that have never experienced it before.**

SCOTT RUECK: For some reason, it just feels normal. This group has taken everything in stride all year and we have had some unique experiences. I think the hunger that this team has had has focused their desire, their wanting to win at such a high level; that it's been easy to cancel distractions and just focus on game.

They are so determined to get back here. That's why they all came here. Last year was not fun from a winning standpoint and feeling like you're disappointed in yourself, the whole experience. We got better as it went but everybody wants to be playing now.

So there's this underlying just desire that cancels distraction. That's a little bit of a distraction. It's like, it's just a game. You know, it's within the lines, and let's play.



SCOTT RUECK: I think for the most part we have focused on fundamentals. You know, it's been awhile since we played, right. It's been two weeks, I think. So everything's been fundamentals. It's going back to the basics of the game and keeping our focus there and keeping our standards high throughout that.

You know, the one moment that we had this year that was really unique, I felt was at Stanford, Tara Day. It was Tara Day. It was a celebrity event that we were invited to, and so you know, this team, they have been in some environments that have been unique; that I think they have weathered well. And so I think it's just another game and yes, you know, we're playing for our life. Everybody is, you know, at this point.

I think that probably is the thing that probably drives your emotion more than anything else is just that.

**Q. How would you describe AJ's influence or impact on this particular team given the experiences that she went through the first two years?**

SCOTT RUECK: I think AJ has had as big a role as anyone on our roster to set the tone and build the foundation of this group.

You know, the Italy experience was a massive opportunity for us that I think this team took full advantage of, and I give AJ a ton of credit for that. Her spirit on that trip, she put everybody at ease. She's just fun. AJ brings joy. She brings positivity and energy to everything. All day, every day.

And that was, you know, half our team is new and we are just forming. We have ten practices and then the next thing you know, we are immersed together for 11 days or whatever our trip was, and you know, that's a lot of meals. That's a lot of time, an 11-day team retreat, basically.

And AJ's voice was just consistent. And so as the group was figuring out, who am I in this group, and what am I going to be and is this a group that I can trust and be myself within, AJ was herself all the time and she just puts you at ease.

Her progress as a player, she's taken huge strides this year. And her wanting to win, she was maybe the most verbal in saying it in the preseason. Coach, I just want to win. Coach, I came here to win. I just want to win. I think that rubbed off on everyone and not only set the tone emotionally for the group and as her spirit does, but the expectation that things are going to be different this year. And I think people just rallied with her. Even though

everybody wanted the same thing, she was the one that probably made it known the most.

**Q. You faced quite a few Big Sky Conference teams in your 14 years here and you've seen Eastern a few times. What about this Eastern team makes them special and what about the Loera factor, and that the fact that they played here at Gill and had a good game last year a couple years ago?**

SCOTT RUECK: Lots of things make them special. I think -- and I would say that's what they are. I mean, you watch them, and it's inspiring to watch them. They have got an incredible floor leader like you just mentioned. She is a coach on the floor at the highest level. She gets it. She can do everything. Shoots it, passes it, runs the floor, or runs the show and defends at a super high level, and gets the ball where it needs to go and controls tempo. All those things. She is what every coach dreams to have.

And so when you have that at your core and then you have the experience they have, and the willingness to play hard, this team plays as hard as anybody, and they are gritty and tough and they believe, you know. And I think I mentioned it at our selection show. You know, they have won 29 games. So if you win 29 games, you feel lots of things, and one of them is, man, we are a team of destiny. You would have that thought. So we know what we are facing in that regard.

So I love the way they play. I love how unselfish they play and they have got scorers all over the place and they commit to the defensive end. So that is what a good team is. So they are a very good team.

**Q. I'm wondering, a lot has been said about the fact that this team, there were not a lot of expectations for this team heading into this season, and I'm wondering if the team met your expectations or if you're surprised by them or if you always knew what you had?**

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, picked 10th in the preseason in our own conference, and then to be here, sitting as a 3-seed in a tournament and hosting. That's dreamy stuff right there. Nobody could have predicted it. I couldn't have predicted that.

You know what I know we had was a team that had all the pieces and if the pieces came together, we had a chance to be a tough out every night. We had a chance to be very good. And I knew the character of the group. But every group has to choose to operate correctly. Leadership has to emerge, and obviously notch it up and level up from a year ago, and that all has happened.

And so I would say, I can't say I'm surprised, and so this is how I answer that question. I've been asked that a couple times. I just say I'm pleased. I'm pleased because the vision that a coach has, happened. It's still happening. We still have levels to go. We are not to the peak yet. Are you kidding? We are still learning. But the ability of this group at its potential is scary good, and we've seen flashes of that and we've seen stretches of that, and you know, so I wouldn't put anything past this group.

I felt like that is what August was for us. It was just the first time they were together, the first time they formed and the first time they competed, it was like, wow. I mean, wow. I know we're playing an exhibition game somewhere in Italy but the way that they competed and the way they played and how relentless it was and competitive it was, it was uncommon. It was special. So I knew we had something, and then it's just been a joy to watch it come together. Thank you.

**Q. You mentioned elite point guards on Sunday, obviously if you get through Eastern Washington, there's potential for facing some elite point guards. I guess what stands out now that you've taken a look at just the point guards in this part of the bracket?**

SCOTT RUECK: Well, I know them all well. I did a home visit with Breeje Schuler, that's the only time I've been to Australia. I've watched her play international before that, through the recruiting process. So I know her game inside and out, and have respected her as an elite competitor.

You know, and then India (ph), we got to know her, obviously competing against her for two, three years, I can't remember how -- I can't keep everything straight anymore.

But she had a great game against us a couple years ago, and we know how talented she is and how dangerous she is. You know, and then Loera (ph), I have to say it right because I said it wrong the other day. We know her, too. She put 18 on us in Gill last year, and played just a great, complete game and that game went down to the final couple minutes.

And so I just have a ton of respect for each of them as competitors, for their game, for the leadership they provide for their team, and you know, know that their teams are here in large part, mostly maybe, because of their leadership. And so much respect.

**Q. With Shelly in particular, since the last time you've seen her, how has she grown and transformed her game? Her numbers have gone up every year.**

SCOTT RUECK: I mean, she's in a system where she has a -- they need her, and they have needed her to be a scorer. And she -- you know, as I was watching her, she was a reluctant scorer. She was the player that you wouldn't notice for a while unless you're really -- you had to really watch her, and if you're watching her, she's controlling the game defensively and offensively; and I know what I'm talking about, a game that is not yet happening or may never happen. But they are here. And so let's just talk to the fans watching basketball in Corvallis this weekend.

But watching her through the recruiting process, I just fell in love with her game because I saw all the little subtle things that she does that a coach can't teach. Her defensive awareness, and she'd get the timely steal, and then her scoring they would elevate when they needed it. It's not like she's coming out to get hers. She just wants to win, and she'll do whatever it takes to win. That's what I coveted through that process is this is just a great player that gets it at an uncommon, high level. It's a gift. She has a gift. And now, it's cool to see her get to step up as a scorer and be so aggressive because now you know, she's just playing into her game at her potential all the time.

**Q. Over the last several days, we've asked a lot of the players what they are most looking forward to^ either playing in their first March Madness Tournament or being back in the March Madness Tournament. What are you looking forward to as a coach being back here in this spot and this position?**

SCOTT RUECK: As a competitor, we're all competitors. I'm a teacher but I'm a competitor, too, right. So it's just fun to be able to be back in the tournament after, you know, a couple of years out. And so personally, the challenge of it is really fun.

As a coach, I just can't wait to see this team have the chance and have the opportunity to play in this. I mean, you know, delivering on the recruiting, all the talks, like what do you want to accomplish in your career, well, I want to deep in the tournament. I want to experience that and I'm just so happy that they get that and really, you know, it's special. There's a funky pressure playing at home, no question the postseason, that just comes with it. But there's no place you'd rather be than playing at home in front of your fan base and when your fan base is Beaver Nation in Gill Coliseum, it doesn't get better than that. I'm just excited for the team to have this opportunity that they have created.

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