

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oregon State vs North Carolina

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Carmichael Arena

Oregon State Beavers Coach Scott Rueck

Media Conference



Q. Scott, you've come into this tournament a lot of times as a higher seed. I was just curious now, as a 14, if that kind of changes your perspective, maybe feel any less pressure or

SCOTT RUECK: It is different. But in many ways it's the same. You have to win, you know. And we definitely have less pressure if you look at it from an outside perspective, you know. But, you know, when you lose it's over. And so it doesn't matter what your seed is, and so there is pressure in that.

I have been most of those years in the tournament, we've hosted. We've been at home to open, and there's always been a funky pressure that comes with that. Because you're the favorite, you're typically the better team. You have your fan base there, you know, that expects a win, and you've got a team that's very confident coming in and in many cases has won their league most cases anyway and they have nothing to lose, you know, it would seem.

And so that higher seed, I've always said in some ways it's a blessing; in some ways it's a curse. And we've had success going on the road, we've had success at home, you know, and we've obviously come up short as well in those situations.

So, yeah, it's for this group it's just a super exciting opportunity that they've created for themselves, you know, and we know we're absolutely the underdog going into it. And so excited to see what we can do.

Q. How about just UNC? What stands out about them? What challenges do they present?

SCOTT RUECK: I mean, they're good and they've veteran. They've got great guard play overall. They've got the with Ustby, just the heart and soul. You can just tell,

they've got a will to win that's unique, that's special, that elevates. And you've got somebody that's been in the program as long as she has, puts up the numbers that she's had and the accolades that she's earned, that's special. It's not common to see that. And maybe this time of year it's common, but it's not common throughout the year.

And so they've got this kind of that "it" factor that just stands out as you watch them compete. And around her, they've just got great pieces. You've got a great rebounder inside that can score one on one and impact shots, you've got great guard play that can shoot it over the top, point guard play that can hit timely shots that are contested, and then you've got attacking guards. And so they can be disruptive defensively, they can hurt you in transition, and then they can grind it out if they have to.

So I'd just say they're a very good team, and so it's a big, big test for us tomorrow.

Q. You did build a case there for the underdog coming into your place and challenging you, yet you're 8-0 in first round games, so it's not like you guys aren't ready for these things. What do you feel like you've been able to do in getting ready for the tournament to have that kind of success?

SCOTT RUECK: Same thing as every year. I think you just try to eliminate weaknesses throughout the season, you know.

And some years you have further to go than others, and this was a year you've been watching since day 1, Nick, with this group knowing that, man, we've had miles to go. So many weaknesses were so obvious at the beginning, and we couldn't avoid them, and then we'd have those moments where everything would sync up and you could see a glimpse of what could be, and then all the weaknesses started to disappear.

And not that they're gone, but they're less and less. And this team knows who they are now, they know how to play Oregon State basketball. And when you look at the sum of the parts, we've become a pretty good team that I think is



dangerous.

And I'm just so happy for them because, you know, that is a tough journey to be a part of. It takes a lot of courage to show up every day when you've got a coaching staff pushing you beyond your comfortable, you know, plays where maybe you start doubting yourself a little bit. And we've had to walk this line all year to try to just get a little bit more, a little bit more, without breaking them and making it not fun because it's too hard.

And certainly when I knew this group could be special was how we managed the adversity that we threw them to in November and December with the toughest preseason schedule I think we've ever played, not a lot of wins to show for it, a bunch of double digit losses, and they kept their head, and they're just like, okay, this is who we are today, and let's get better.

And it's a long season. I think we can be pretty good, and you could see that belief. And I give the people that were up here before me all the credit for keeping this team engaged when, man, it was hard at times.

And then here we are, at the end of the year, playing by far the best basketball of the year for us, and they're looking around going, huh, you know, we're a good team. And for a teacher and a coach, it's been as rewarding as anything I've ever done.

Q. Speaking of November, you played a lot of tournament type teams in that month. Aside from all the obvious improvement that you guys have made, is there one or two things you feel like you're better equipped to you have that you're able to face these type of teams now than November's or one or two things that really stand out to you?

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah. Discipline. I think just our defensive ability we made so many mistakes only because we just didn't know. We're asking a group of people that have never played together, really, to execute on both ends of the floor against, you know, a Final Four worthy team probably in UConn. That's a big ask.

And so, I mean, that game opened with a blown defensive transition assignment that is like breathing for our program typically, and it's like, oh, my goodness, we just have so far to go.

And so I would say the consistency and the accuracy on the defensive end of the floor has been what has allowed this team just their buy in to that. They realized if we're going to do anything this year, we have to become a great defensive team, because we have struggled offensively

most of the year.

And so to stay in games and have a chance, you gotta be locked down. And so they have given in to what that takes, including rebounding. And so I'd say defensive accuracy and rebounding have been one and two on the defensive rebounding. And on the other end of the floor, just seeing the floor and understanding, you know, who we are, going through reads.

If you look at our 3 point shooting in the first half of the year compared to the second half of the year, it's night and day different. I mean, remarkably different. Well, it wasn't that this team can't shoot; it was that we're shooting a contested 3 every single time because the ball is getting there late and we're up against the shot clock and we're shooting terrible shots because we are not executing well.

And so then that I'd add to that just offensive execution, understanding what we're trying to accomplish, and the ball is just moving to where we look like a legitimately good team that's tough to defend.

Q. So much of the nation hasn't seen you since the big run last year, and obviously so much has changed. What do you want people to know about this team in particular and the journey? I mean what a journey you've been on since in the last 12 months.

SCOTT RUECK: Yeah. Well, they should be celebrated as much as anybody, in my opinion. What they've done is as remarkable as anything I've been a part of to get back to this. They've covered so much ground.

When you look at the makeup of the roster, we don't have one person that's been a go to player on a college team in her career; not one. Everybody's been a role player.

We returned AJ as a returning starter, and Kelsey started most of last year for us before Timea Gardiner took her spot and I brought her off the bench. Outside of that, Kennedie was a role player at the backup 1, and Sela rarely played.

And then the people that joined us, you know, in a I mean, we didn't get started really recruiting until mid April last year because our year went so long, and then the decisions took a little while for our former players to make. We didn't know what we needed. And so that is a group assembled in late April, early May, and they were all still looking none of them had played a role like that.

So for this group to do what it takes to be as cohesive as necessary and then to rise into, like, go to scorers and go to defenders and just, you know, a gritty, tough team that's

like not only did we deserve to compete; we should win.

Any coach would tell you, I believe, that being close and winning are it's like a Grand Canyon of a lead. It's not close, actually. It's like it's easy to be close, but to close teams out and get the stops you need and then to execute and get the bucket that you need, that usually comes with years of experience. And for this group they've done it in a year. It's like light speed, you know, just how it's all come together.

So that only happens with great leadership inside the locker room and high level of character, you know, that can choose to do what it takes to overcome all those things. And so I just think that the growth from day 1 until today is as significant as I can imagine it being anywhere at any time. I've not been a part of something quite like it.

Q. You've had Sela for two years. I was wondering if you could talk about the evolution of how you've taken her game and figured out what she could do, what she couldn't really do, and made her into the player that she's become this season.

SCOTT RUECK: Well, Sela is special. I recruited her because I saw that potential day 1 even though she hadn't had an opportunity to prove it. Injuries derailed her senior year in high school, derailed her time at Cal, and then we she arrived in Corvallis and was coming off of she was healthy, but she didn't believe in her body yet. And that's a tough place to be, especially for a big, not to trust your knees, maybe not to trust your core strength, not to trust your body in general. It's a hard place to be when your mind is there instead of on the game.

But the skill set's there. And so then it was like, okay, can I do this, you know? And what if I try and I'm not quite good enough? And then there's all these you know, these things that are inside the person that cause you to doubt yourself maybe.

And so it's been like a struggle, like a fight, and trying to help bring that out of her every day. And so you'd see these flashes I mean, a year ago she'd have a day or two where I'd get on her and she would actually, for a stretch, you know, give Ray a ton of trouble in practice. And it's like, okay, that's the Sela that I know is in there.

And now that's just become more and more consistent. She's given to the game a completely different level of effort. She's been in the gym getting shots up all year long, off season, through the year. She's just taken everything to another level.

So to see her have success and to see herself differently

has been extremely rewarding, and it's all because of her and her teammates encouraging her and helping her just operate at a different level as a competitor, ultimately.

And so she's a sweetheart of a human, as kind as they come, maybe you'd say a big teddy bear; but down the stretch, those who have been watching have seen a fierce competitor come out of her, someone that will rip rebounds, fight for rebounds, fight for loose balls, get low and stay slow. And she's made such a massive difference in our evolution.

Q. Coach, obviously it's been a journey for you guys. Coming in with that lower seed, you talked about it a little bit, but do you feel like this makes you a little bit more dangerous in this seeding?

SCOTT RUECK: I don't know what that what I think of that. I mean, I feel like if you're a top seed, your dangerous. Like I'd say North Carolina is dangerous.

So maybe the history that we have had as a program, as a coaching staff, I guess, as a low seed, you know, you wouldn't want to see maybe a program that has had the success that we've had previously because this is not new for us. Sometimes you got a low seed; maybe it's new or something.

But I think it just means that we've got a big challenge on somebody else's home floor, you know, and yet it's a group that's won in some big environments historically and this year. And so, yeah, I hope people think we're dangerous.

Q. Hey, coach, you guys have obviously faced a ton of tough opponents this season. I'm just kind of wondering, where do you guys kind of place North Carolina in this ranking? Do you think this is one of the toughest teams you'll face, one, or, two, I'm curious how much do you kind of look back or how much have you looked back to your guys' game against UConn with this team heading into this matchup, pointing that, hey, we played well against UConn; we can do it again against North Carolina and win this time heading into this first round.

SCOTT RUECK: We certainly need to approach the game with confidence. And I think our preseason is the reason that we're able to do that. I don't know what else would give us that hope. I would say that, statistically speaking, North Carolina is second on our schedule from just a you know, UConn's gotta be 1, right? And they're a 2, and North Carolina is a 3 seed. So I'd say they're the second best team on our schedule this year based upon that, and that's how it appears as well in watching them.

The UConn game way back in November was the moment that this team understood how hard they had to play defensively. And from that point forward we always had that game to look back on, and I'm very grateful for that experience. They gave into it that day it, and it will demand that exact same effort tomorrow for us to have a chance. And so I'm grateful for that.

The Illinois game is one I think the teams have some similarities. North Carolina has had a better season overall, but the style of play and their guard play reminds me of Illinois just a little bit.

And we really learned a lot that week getting read for the Illini. They shot lights out against us and beat us. But that style of play and their athleticism coming at you and attacking the rim I think has some similarities.

And so I'm very grateful for our non conference schedule and how it's prepared this team not only for the

West Coast Conference and our opportunity to win that but for tomorrow's game as well.

Q. Scott, you coached two of your assistant coaches in the NCAA Tournament. How has their connection to the program been helpful all season and now in particular?

SCOTT RUECK: I don't know how you put value on it. I think when you have two amazing humans like Deven and Sydney are that are invested in the program that poured into them, but also helped build, you know, they come in with just an ownership, a confidence, and then just they're us. They care so much about people.

So they have this inclusive environment. They just love on these players day after day. The team can look to them. They've been in the trenches; they've been there, done that. So they have given our team so much confidence. When they say you can do it, it just means so much. And, I mean, it's been a dream to get to coach with both of them and have them back in these capacities.

The way it's impacted me and our program is just having that level of consistency. They know exactly what it takes, they know we are as a program, and so they're just as on brand as it gets for Oregon State. So I think that their impact has been immeasurable.

Q. Against a lot of the WCC teams you guys were able to have that size of energy just play bully ball in the paint. This North Carolina team has some serious height on them as well. How do you feel like that paint match up is gonna go?

SCOTT RUECK: I think it's really key to the game. I think, you know, their identity is defense. You have to watch five minutes of an ACC game to hear the commentators talk about North Carolina's defense and how they're the No. 1 defense in the ACC.

Well, that includes rebounding. That includes taking away the rim. They're great at it. They help so well and so quick. And I really admire how hard they play and how physical that they are.

Fortunately, we have some history with that. I mean, we've seen a lot of physicality this year, you know, so we know that we're gonna have to match that, surpass it, if possible. And our position defensively inside the paint and against the drive is going to be so key to tomorrow's game.

And so I think it's usually games this time of year are won under the basket, and I would assume that tomorrow's game will be won, you know, right there as well. And so I think you're focused on the pivotal aspect of tomorrow's game.

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