

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

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

Oklahoma State Cowgirls

Coach Jacie Hoyt

Micah Gray

Stailee Heard

Media Conference



second-chance opportunities.

MICAH GRAY: I would say the same thing.

Q. You all have had the same starting lineup for all 32 games this year. Can you talk a little bit about what that group's chemistry is like, especially with such a balanced scoring offense that you have? Like how that's executed and what it feels like out there?

MICAH GRAY: I think just any night anyone can go off. Just having that chemistry of understanding like you can hit a shot, I can make a shot and then everybody else can make a shot. Just coming together like that.

And then also just knowing where people are on the floor. Like we know like Stailee's going to rebound and we can run. Just simple stuff like that.

Q. Stailee, I know that K State game was emotional for you. What have the last two weeks looked like for you?

STAILEE HEARD: Honestly, we're all on to March Madness now. It's NCAA tournament. You've just got to let it go. You've got to learn from it.

It's good to see her out here. I just, Big 12 tournament, it's just, it was disappointing, it was very disappointing.

But we've moved on. I feel like we've learned a lot. We've gotten better in the last two weeks. We've talked about things that we needed to learn that we learned from in the big 12 tournament. So I feel like we're just ready to get a win.

Q. As you mentioned, it's March Madness. What's it like to experience that with Tyla?

STAILEE HEARD: Oh, it's awesome. I mean, I never would have thought I would be here with my sister. But it's also honestly a dream come true. I'm just excited, I'm taking it all in. We're in a beautiful environment and just we get to spend it with each other and have fun with each other.

Q. Both of you guys were here for an NCAA tournament appearance last year. You lost a really tough first round close game to South Dakota State. Given that, how hungry are you, how hungry is the team this year to notch a victory in the NCAA tournament tomorrow?

MICAH GRAY: I think we're really hungry. We understand that we don't want to be first rounders again. That just gives us more motivation. We're hungry, like you said, to get a win.

STAILEE HEARD: Yeah, like she said. I'm just excited to be back with this group of girls. I feel like we've got a taste of what it feels like to be playing now and in the tournament last year. I feel like we're just ready to win in the tournament now.

Q. You guys are one of the better offensive rebounding teams in the country. Can you talk a little bit about what your mentality is when you're going to the offensive boards to rebound?

STAILEE HEARD: I mean, honestly, it's a lost -- I feel like it's lost in women's basketball. You don't see very many teams offensive rebounding or trying to go get second-chance opportunities.

I feel like that messes up the defense, their transition. They think if they can't get a rebound, then they can't run in transition.

I feel like Coach preaches a lot about going on -- hitting the glass very hard and trying to give ourselves



Q. For both of you, how beneficial is it having Jadyn come off the bench almost like a sparkplug?

MICAH GRAY: Oh, it's very beneficial. She just brings the energy to our team. She makes the offense run better in my opinion, and then just brings the intensity off the bench.

STAILEE HEARD: Yeah, she definitely picks up the pace which she comes in. You don't see very many 6-men coming off the bench how she does and putting up the stats and numbers that she does. I feel like it's just a blessing. I mean, she's awesome. She does what she's supposed to do. She plays her role and she understands her role. I mean, we play for each other, so honestly, coming off the bench, it doesn't mean anything as long as we're winning.

Q. Stailee, so last year obviously the season you guys had, getting to the tournament, what you've learned. What did you learn last year that you can apply this year that will help you guys this week?

STAILEE HEARD: I mean, I feel like it's super easy to look on -- look ahead to next games. Just I feel like last year we were at a very historical place playing at UConn. I feel like we were just so excited and we were like, oh, if we win this game we get to play UConn. Like we weren't focused like being in the present and being where our feet are.

I feel like this year we really emphasized, especially the returners, like we cannot look over our first game. We have to get the job done first, then we can look ahead. But I feel like we've really set in and like we have to focus on Princeton. It's no one else but Princeton right now.

Q. Micah, obviously senior season. Is there a sense of urgency that's different this time around than maybe it has been in the past?

MICAH GRAY: Yes, for sure. Just my last season, I just want to do everything that I just set out to do. Then just being with these girls, my teammates, just stay where my feet are, being present and just playing as long as possible.

Q. One win experience-wise coming from Haleigh Timmer, who's on the team that got you last year. What was that like when she came in and how much did you guys have fun with her this time around? And obviously she's an awesome kid, so what's that been like having her join you? And then have you guys leaned into that any at all going into this tournament, what happened a year ago?

STAILEE HEARD: Honestly, it's awesome to have her. I

mean, granted, she did beat us in the tournament last year, but she's a phenomenal player, great person. She's just awesome to be around. I'm just glad to have her. She can pretty much -- she'll do -- put her body on the line for us. I feel like she's just a really good teammate.

MICAH GRAY: I definitely would say the same thing. She's just a great teammate, great person. Then she's consistent. You know what you're going to get from her every night. She is just awesome.

Q. I assume you guys have had a chance to take a look at least a little bit of tape on Princeton and talk to your coaches about them and so on. What do you make of them and what do you think it's going to take to prevail tomorrow over them?

MICAH GRAY: I think Princeton is a really balanced team. They're kind of like us in a sense, they have multiple double digit players on their team. I think it's going to take a team effort just to put our best, everybody's best on the line and do our jobs.

MODERATOR: We are now joined by head coach Jacie Hoyt of Oklahoma State. We'll start with an opening statement from the coach followed by questions. Coach, go ahead and start us off.

JACIE HOYT: Well, it's just always a blessing to get to be playing this time of the year. We've had a really great experience here so far. Just very excited.

The kid in me is so excited to be here at UCLA. Just took a picture of the Pyramid of Success. That's kind of what I grew up on. So this is just a really amazing opportunity for a lot of reasons for us. Really thrilled to be here, and looking forward to all that is ahead of us.

I feel like we're playing our best basketball right now and coming up against a really, really solid Princeton team. I'm excited to see how we measure up against them. But all in all, just feel very fortunate to be here.

Q. Coach, one of the narratives coming into this matchup tomorrow is that these are two teams that look a lot like each other; very balanced scoring, very efficient offenses. Do you find that to be a valid narrative or do you think there's some important differences that we're overlooking?

JACIE HOYT: No, I think that's spot on. Everything about them is exactly that. It's balanced. They're not a team that you can take one or two players away and feel like that's a big part of your game plan. Everyone on their team's capable of stepping up at different points. Very, very

efficient. They're very well coached, they execute incredibly well, they're not rattled, they're not shaken. The moment never seems too big for them. So I think that overall just the balance of their roster is what makes them so good.

Q. Just to follow up a little on that, what causes you to stay awake at night when you think about them? Put another way, what are the couple things you really feel you guys need to do tomorrow to win?

JACIE HOYT: You know, we just have to play well. I know that's kind of a boring answer, but I don't really see any weaknesses in them. I honestly don't. You could say that they're a little bit undersized in the post, but that's been our narrative all season long. I mean, truly, when you stack up our rosters, I think that we are darn near identical. We shoot it a little bit more from the 3 than they do, but they just have an ability to really use their versatility. They can go inside, they can go outside. I don't feel like there's one thing or two things that we have to do, I think that we just need to play a really complete basketball game.

Q. This is your third time here at the NCAA tournament. Is there a little extra motivation to get that first win?

JACIE HOYT: Yeah, always. I mean, for us, I think that first year no one expected us to be there, right? We were coming in off of a team that had a nine-win season the season before, so we got there. No one thought we would be there. Then we lost in a very heartbreaking game to a team that went on to the Elite 8.

And then last season kind of had that same taste in our mouth of just a little bit of disappointment to go home when we did.

Now here we are again. Of course we would love to take that next step and get to play into the second round. Every team is good at this point, and everyone has to be playing at their best. You can even play as well as you possibly can and it's still not good enough.

But we were certainly looking forward to just getting to play against a really good team. Like I said, see where we measure up against a team that I was really unfamiliar with until now just because of where they're located, never really crossing paths. For sure, for us, we want to take that next step as a program. I think that we've positioned ourselves really well, but at the end of the day you still have to go out and do it.

Q. They kind of do a good job of not turning the ball over. When you all are able to force those mistakes tomorrow, how valuable will it be to turn those into

points?

JACIE HOYT: Well, I think they're really good defensively, and in the half court you're not going to get anything easy. So if we can get some easier points in transition, whether that be turnovers or rebounds, that's going to be really crucial for us because I think every basket for both teams is going to be really hard to come by.

Q. I'm curious, have you chatted with your players about your like inner kid excitement and what it means to be here and all that stuff?

JACIE HOYT: Just a little bit. But honestly, unfortunately they don't get it, right? Like you can say John Wooden, I mean, but they don't get it. What they don't understand is that so much of our program's DNA came from him and that Pyramid of Success.

I played for a coach that knew him well, and fortunately for me, I got to learn a ton from her that she learned from him. It's definitely a part of my DNA that will be with me for the rest of my career, and has always been with me, is so much of who I am.

History isn't the most exciting thing to them unfortunately sometimes. I try, but little do they know, you know, it's infused in them as well because it's within our program.

Q. Around the balanced scoring piece, can you talk a little bit about how you coach that? Like how much of that is just the kind of players that you have and how much of that is something that you feel?

JACIE HOYT: Just in assembling our roster, I think our staff did a really great job of just getting all the right pieces and assembling a team that is very well built from top to bottom.

For us, it's really just about playing the game the right way and shot selection is really important to us. We've got a selfless group of kids that understand that we sometimes have to pass up good shots for great shots. I think that's really what it boils down to.

You can look at all of our games and we see a lot of points scored, but more importantly for me you see a lot of assists. I think that that's something that we really emphasize, but our kids have done a great job of understanding it and really implementing and buying into that.

Q. Kind of recently we've seen Jadyn become your go-to scoring option for you all. How valuable -- obviously we know she's a good playmaker. How



valuable is it having her scoring coming off the bench?

JACIE HOYT: Yeah, anytime you can get a player off the bench who the other team has to prepare for, that's a huge asset. That's what she's been for us all season long.

For us, kind of going back to the previous question, it's really just about what player we feel has maybe the advantage from a matchup standpoint or from a strategy standpoint, and she has certainly been that the last couple games. I'm really curious to see what it's going to look like against Princeton because they're so well balanced as well. Jadyn's been really good for us all season long coming off the bench.

Q. Coach, your first year last year, you didn't have a ton of experience in the tournament. This year, whether it's Timmer, Stailee, Micah, those kids, is the confidence level and the mindset just a little different this time around maybe than it was the first couple years?

JACIE HOYT: You know, I felt like last season I had to spend so much time trying to prep our team for what to expect just in this type of setting. It's been a really nice luxury this year to not have to do that. They know what it's about. They know even like right now for example, like media, this is not something that we normally do, right? But they just, you don't have to break it down to them and say this is what's next and this is how it's going to work. It's just we understand that we're here and we're here to win and to play as long as possible.

I do think that experience is truly the only teacher in some cases. Last season they had to go through that to understand. I feel just a different level of kind of confidence I would say, and just I'm really curious to see how that experience is going to shake out for them.

I've seen them be great leaders with that as well for the players who haven't had this experience yet.

Q. Along that same line, obviously when you look at these kids or your program right now, the hope as they get to the tournament, the expectation and it's just a reality now. So with that in mind, does that also give them maybe a little bit of a chip on their shoulder that, hey, we're supposed to be here, this is who we are, and they're going to go out there -- and now every opponent's different, Princeton is obviously a good basketball team, but is the mindset different maybe from that perspective with a little chip on their shoulder saying, hey, we belong here?

JACIE HOYT: 100 percent, and I think that's such a

testament to where our program is now. As I mentioned before, that first year no one thought we were going to be there. Last year we surprised a lot of people. I think we got picked like 11th or something and finished 3rd in conference. Then this year the narrative has totally changed, and that's the whole point is we want to continue to build it. We expect to see our name come up on that selection show Sunday. Now it's just a matter of seeding and who we're playing and where we're going.

Eventually we want to be a team that's hosting, right? I'm really proud of the path that we're on, but the expectation for us was always to be here. Now we're trying to take that next step and stay here.

Q. And lastly, obviously it's too early to reflect, but the amount of wins the last couple of seasons, the trajectory of the program is obviously in a good spot. So how big is it -- does that put any extra pressure on tomorrow's game? Does it change your mindset at all, because obviously this program is headed ultimately in a very good direction?

JACIE HOYT: I think the great thing for how we do things is we're the same all the time. So the messaging that I had for our team day one that they showed up is the same messaging that we're going to have going into tomorrow's game. That's the beauty of it when you've got consistency and kids who understand why they're here and what we're trying to accomplish. You don't have to motivate in any different way or feel any different type of pressure. We just go do what we've done and what's got us here.

Q. Stailee talked about a little bit how last year being at UConn, being in an historic place, you might have looked ahead and started looking at the Huskies. How have you and the staff kind of avoided not looking ahead? And they both talked about being where they're at, being where their feet are. How have you kind of not looked ahead to UCLA or not looked further beyond Princeton?

JACIE HOYT: Yeah. Well, I said it earlier, but I think experience is just a great lesson. One of the mistakes I made as a coach last year is not realizing that our kids were looking ahead as much as they were. Some of those things you just aren't aware of and don't quite understand because I don't think any coach ever looks ahead.

You see it on the men's side. Watching all the basketball yesterday, all the upsets and things like that. So I think that Stailee and Micah had to learn that lesson the hard way last year.

Now I'm looking forward to just again how that's going to



kind of shake out and translate into this year, and their maturity and understanding that nothing is going to be given to you and you've got to find ways to earn everything, and everyone wants it just the same at this time of year.

Q. Coach, you mentioned you would like to host somewhere down the line, but you also mentioned that like yesterday in the men's bracket we're seeing exciting upsets, one of the hallmarks of the first and second rounds of the men's bracket year after year. Do you like the current system in the women's game where there's this outsized reward to the Top 16 teams, or would you like to see more of a neutral court type of phenomenon going forward in this tournament?

JACIE HOYT: Yeah, I think we would all say that we would love to see that neutral site happen eventually, but I also think we understand that the position that we're in right now is to do it the way that we are.

I think that it's a great format. I am so excited to get to experience the fandom that comes with being a UCLA Bruin, and I think just everywhere you go that's a part of it. I do think that it puts a lot of, I don't know that pressure is the right word, but emphasis on your games throughout the season, and understanding every single game matters no matter who you're playing.

So I do think that we're a little bit unique in that, and it just kind of comes with the territory. I think there's pros and cons to both. Like I said, eventually I think we would all love to be able to have neutral sites, but certainly the fan experience right now with the format I think is really a great option.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

JACIE HOYT: Thank you.