

# 2024 NCAA Women's Volleyball Championship

Wednesday, December 18, 2024

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC Yum! Center

**Pitt Panthers**

**Coach Dan Fisher**

**Olivia Babcock**

**Rachel Fairbanks**

**Torrey Stafford**

Semifinal Press Conference



staff, all the players, and I just think we make them better, they make us better. The opportunity of playing them multiple times in one season is good preparation for big moments like this.

TORREY STAFFORD: I would also say it's nice that we're here and we played against them three weeks ago in this arena and we have the opportunity to play them again on this big stage. But we've been here before. It's our second home.

**Q. Rachel, this is your fourth Final Four. How do you think you've matured from each appearance making it this far, and how have you grown learning what you need to do and prepare for this matchup?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, well, as a player, I think I've gotten better. Thanks. I think I've just -- my toolkit has gotten better, and along with that just every single year it adds a year of experience under my belt.

I think me along with the older players on the team are used to high-pressure situations like this. Pressure is a privilege. So we love being in situations like this, and we're more prepared. We're ready.

**Q. For all of the players, do you subscribe to the theory that you often hear it's hard to beat a team a third time? If not, what advantage do you see going into this match based on your previous success?**

TORREY STAFFORD: Do I subscribe to that? I think it's hard to beat Louisville, period. They're a good team. They know us, and we know them.

I feel like, like I said before, I feel like we have an advantage of being able to play in this arena three weeks ago, and coming out on top. I feel like it's really up to having fun and competing, and I feel like when we have fun and compete, we can win everything.

OLIVIA BABCOCK: Yeah, just overall you hear that phrase all the time. But when thinking back on our conference, I feel like we have an extremely hard conference. And at the end of the day, it's hard to streak

DAN FISHER: Well, it's good to be back here, and we appreciate the hospitality of the city. I just got a gift of a really cool Louisville Slugger bat that I think will probably be in my office forever.

We had a good practice today. We're glad to be done with finals and able to fully focus on a really tough match coming up.

**Q. Olivia, could you speak about your serve? We've seen your serve get more dominant over the last couple years. Could you take us through that process?**

OLIVIA BABCOCK: I feel like we definitely focus on serving a lot in our gym. It's just about creating good habits. A topspin serve is definitely one that you can't expect to have a perfect scenario all the time. The toss might be a bit off.

Stuff like that, we really work on focusing on hand contact. And I feel like working on that has helped me find more success in being consistent, just knowing it's not going to be perfect every time, but I know how to adjust to situations like that.

**Q. You guys have played Louisville two or three times every year. Usually one team wins one match, the other team wins two of them. How do you characterize the rivalry with them over the last few years?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Well, let's just start by saying we're very fortunate to play them so many times throughout the year. We have immense respect for them, for the coaching



wins in general, and I feel like we've played a lot of hard games back to back.

Yeah, it's the same team, but I think we know this team, and we know that our best is really good. So we're just going to compete. We know they're going to bring their best, we know we're going to bring our best and just make the little plays separate us.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, they said it well. It's hard to beat a team once. It's hard to beat a team twice.

**Q. With every team in this Final Four being No. 1 seeds, is there an added pressure knowing that it's just the top competition, even though it should be the top competition every time?**

OLIVIA BABCOCK: You kind of answered it how I would answer it. The top competition is going to be in the Final Four every year. Even if it were a 2 seed, I think we'd still feel the same amount of pressure.

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, any team in this competition is going to be a contender for the National Championship.

**Q. Speaking of the pressure you have, since you're the No. 1 overall seed but you're playing Louisville who's hosting it, do you feel like you have a bit less pressure on yourselves because you're playing basically a road game?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, it's nice that we've had the opportunity of playing here and against a team that we know. There's perks and challenges to playing a team that we're so used to. But, yeah, any team we're going to prepare for the same and lay it all out on the court.

**Q. I know it hasn't been that long since you guys played each other, but a lot can change in just a few weeks. How do you think Louisville looks different, and how do you think you guys are different from the last time you saw each other?**

OLIVIA BABCOCK: Yeah, I feel like ever since the last time we played each other, it's just been a bunch of tournament games. So we've all played a lot of hard competition.

We always talk about the idea of streaking and technically to get here you have to be streaking wins. So it seems like both of us are at the peak of our game.

I feel like it's going to be fun. All the little things are clicking for both teams. I think it's just going to be a really hard match because we're both at the best at this point.

**Q. I assume you know that two hours ago you were all named first-team All-Americans. How do you explain the success of this program kind of breaking into the elite in recent years, and what drew you to Pittsburgh?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: It truly is attributed to all of Fish's hard work, all the coaching staff, and then the players that came before us. He's truly built a legacy at Pitt, just every single year getting better and better and better. And the players that go through the program just like set the tone for the incoming people, and it's just a cycle of wanting to get better.

TORREY STAFFORD: I would also add that I've been saying this, but I feel like we're not just really playing for ourselves but also for the people that laid the foundation for this program. This is not only for us, the seniors, the previous student-athletes that went to Pitt, too.

**Q. Olivia and Torrey, last year was your first time making it to the Final Four, now you're back. What is your mentality coming back, and how have you grown from that experience coming into this matchup against Louisville tomorrow night?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: I feel like the difference between last year and this year, last year everyone tries to prepare you for it, but when you actually get there, you're still overwhelmed. It's all still new to you. So you're kind of distracted by the outside noise.

But this year we've worked on channeling it in, staying in our three-foot world. I feel like that's helped us have success. At this point we're no longer new to this. So we know how the outside noise is going to go so it's going to make it easier to focus on our team and our goal.

TORREY STAFFORD: Yeah, we're not new to this; we're true to this. I would say we just have the experience from last year so we know what to expect. And I think Liv said it best, we stay focused to our three-foot world and it's just us on the court and playing for each other.

**Q. How do you guys handle all the pressure with schoolwork, practice, travel, and being a student-athlete? What is that pressure?**

RACHEL FAIRBANKS: Yeah, it's a lot. It's a lot to handle. But I think we have very nice -- we're fortunate to have good resources at Pitt that help us through everything and good mentors that show us the way.

I mean, just prioritizing, making sure your priorities are in align and just time management. But this year it's very

nice we are done with finals. So now we only get to focus on volleyball.

TORREY STAFFORD: Previous years we were taking finals during this time. So we're glad that we got everything out of the way before we came here.

**Q. Do you guys feel like having a fast start for this game is a little bit more important since you're playing basically a road game, just to quiet the crowd?**

TORREY STAFFORD: We always talk about starting fast. That's one of our keys. We have so many things, but I feel like that's one that we try to accomplish each match. Starting fast is big. But I would agree that if you do start fast in an away arena, then it does quiet the crowd.

**Q. Obviously you guys have played DeBeer and Luper so much over the past two seasons. What makes them such tough pin hitters to defend against?**

OLIVIA BABCOCK: I mean, they're just great players at a great program. It's very clear that they're people that their team relies on, and naturally they're practicing every single day, they're getting better every single day.

It's just very clear that especially playing us just brings out the best in them. They're definitely tough to defend and definitely a focus of ours, but I also feel like playing them brings out the best in us. We know whatever they're coming at us with, we're coming right back at them.

**Q. The players mentioned that Louisville brings out the best in you and you bring out the best in them. How would you characterize the rivalry considering how often you guys have played over the last few years?**

DAN FISHER: From my end, it's nothing but respect. I do agree that playing against great teams makes you better and exposes you for stuff you don't see in your own practice gym or when you're playing a weaker opponent.

Even though we've won both games, there's been things we've learned from those that really they made us uncomfortable in certain areas. So I think -- look, the rivalry is probably a little bit more for the fans, but the competition has definitely made us both better.

**Q. Dan, Bre has had pretty solid performances against Louisville in both appearances this season. What's allowed her to excel in some of the most important matches of the season?**

DAN FISHER: Yeah, Bre has been so consistent this year

against everyone. She seems to always hit .500 no matter who we're playing. I don't know that it's just Louisville, but she has a tendency to get pumped up for big games.

**Q. Olivia has 45 kills in the two matches against U of L. I'm wondering if you can give us any sense of how their approach to her has changed over the season, maybe over the years, and what you expect tomorrow.**

DAN FISHER: I don't know how anyone approaches Olivia. She's a dominant attacker, and they're certainly going to know that she's going to get a lot of attempts.

But there have been games over the last two years where we set Torrey a lot of balls. I think they know that Olivia is going to get her attempts. But depending on game flow, it might go a little bit more to some other players.

**Q. When you're scouting Louisville, how do you not overdo it when you're scouting because you've seen them so much, you know what they're going to bring, and not read into something they've done well once but not every time you've played them?**

DAN FISHER: Yeah, I'm trying to find that balance as a coach because when you overdo it, sometimes the athletes are trying to play a scouting report on the court. We want them on the court playing the percentages but trusting what they're seeing.

I think probably uncharacteristically, like early this week, we didn't watch any Louisville video, we just worked on some things we wanted to work on.

**Q. I wanted to talk about Torrey and Olivia's friendship. When you first recruited them, they played for Sunshine together. I'm curious what made you want to recruit them together. It's very rare that two people play in the same club come to the same team in D-I.**

DAN FISHER: This was right when COVID lifted and we were able to go out and recruit, and I had seen video of Torrey, and I went to a showcase to watch her. And then I saw this girl Olivia who was very raw at the time, but her head was above the net, and I just kind of kept wondering who this girl was that no one was talking about.

So I saw them both for the first time live at the same showcase, and I called -- I have a tendency to -- it takes me a long time to make decisions recruiting, and it drives my staff crazy, but I called them all up and I said these two girls are 100 percent yeses. From the time I saw them both, I was convinced. Does that answer your question?

**Q. What were you seeing about them that made you want to recruit both of them?**

DAN FISHER: Well, certainly like the physical characteristics, but I think they both played with -- especially Torrey at that moment, Torrey really is a joyful player. She has a spirit about her on the court that really is for me really attractive. It's rare you see someone that's a really joyful player.

**Q. This is your fourth straight Final Four; what about you in terms of your mindset? What's this week been like for you? Is it just business as usual, or is there anything different than past years?**

DAN FISHER: Well, it's never business as usual when there's so much going on. I think I had to pack about seven different outfits, and the portal opened. They're finishing finals. It's not your normal schedule, but it helps to have gone through it before.

I think my main mindset, which isn't really abnormal, but is just what we preach to the players so myself and my coaches are peaking at game time, that we're saving our best energy for then.

**Q. Through all the meetings with Louisville, is there a characteristic you pull from those matches that just comes through again and again? You guys have gone five sets, the whole length through, so many times.**

DAN FISHER: Yeah, I think the two things that jump out is both teams like to just take big rips. I don't think other team tips a ton. Then probably just the toughness. I think there's been multiple games over the years where maybe one team thought it was over and it wasn't.

**Q. What should we make of the presence of all four No. 1 seeds here? Is there a gap between these teams and the rest of the NCAA?**

DAN FISHER: Probably, but it's a really small gap. I think we found ourselves in a five-setter with Oregon. Louisville had a close one with Northern Iowa. There is a gap, but it's small.

**Q. The last time a Cardinal had 20 kills just in general this season was against you guys. It was Anna. How do you limit her impact on the court and make sure she doesn't repeat the performance?**

DAN FISHER: I wish I knew. I think that's the key word is slowing her down, just limiting. She has some tendencies, but what makes her great is she's -- even if there's a well-formed block, she can still find a way off a lot of times,

as can our players.

When you're playing against a good player, it's just pressure over time. A good block, a good defense over time, wearing her down.

**Q. Does rehearsal look any different tomorrow than it has over the past many weeks?**

DAN FISHER: Potentially we sometimes take -- we'll do a session with our sports psychologist tonight, so if there's a theme in there that we want to -- that resonates, we'll probably include that.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports