

2023 Women's College World Series

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Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Utah Utes

Amy Hogue

Mariah Lopez

Ellessa Bonstrom

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're going to get going with Utah with Coach Amy Hogue, Mariah Lopez, and Ellessa Bonstrom.

You want to open with an opening statement?

AMY HOGUE: Go Utes. Being here is exciting. It's been a long time. Apparently 29 years, someone's been keeping track. It's changed a lot. This game has grown a ton. I couldn't be happier than to be here with the group I've got here today.

Q. I believe you were on that '94 team. What do you remember about Utah's trip that year?

AMY HOGUE: I remember that we weren't expected to be there, kind of like this year. We were scrappy and played as a team, kind of like this group. We had more fun than anybody. That year we opened with Oklahoma State in Game 1, so I don't think anyone cheered for us except for the hundred maybe we brought from Salt Lake.

We just had a good time. That's what Utah does. That's our culture. It's been that way, and it's still that way.

Q. Amy, just a bigger picture question for you. Pace of play has been a big topic of conversation as games get a little longer. Do you see that as an issue at all, and if so, do you have any ideas of things you would want to see changed?

AMY HOGUE: I think some days it's an issue for sure. I know we talk about it a lot, trying to find good ideas to change it, mostly to fit within a TV window. Our sport is so fantastic to watch on TV.

If we have to speed it up in order to get those prime

windows, then we absolutely should continue to figure out how to do that. I've always thought the strike zone needs to get a little bigger or even be called with the size that it is. We're calling too many balls.

I think that any of the games that I feel like the strike zone allowed for us to call corners, those are the games staying under two hours. So I think that's the easiest fix rather than changing too many things about the game that are already so great. So call the strike zone the way it's intended, which includes corners. Makes it a little safer too. It's getting a little dangerous.

Q. For Ellessa and Mariah both, your coach talked about it just a minute ago, maybe you weren't expected to be here, but you guys have fought all year. Pac-12 champions, all the way through the postseason and all that. Have you guys embraced that "chip on your shoulder" mentality through this year?

ELLESSA BONSTROM: Yeah, I think what helped us was not making postseason last season. We had the record. We were right there to make it, and we were just one of those bubble teams that didn't make it.

So I think that kind of led to this year where all season we have been saying we're going to be here at this time. So I think, if we wouldn't have made postseason last year, it wouldn't have been as great of a story as it is this year.

It's definitely that "chip on the shoulder" mentality for this year.

MARIAH LOPEZ: I agree with her. I think that we've known from the start of this year that we were going to make it here. So just playing like that all year, taking that with us into this weekend and just playing like we know we should be here.

Q. Pac-12 is a great softball conference. You guys are not in necessarily one of the tropical weather places of the Pac-12. How do you compensate for that in terms of you have sort of a real winter, unlike Tucson and L.A. and places like that? What are ways that Utah compensates and is able to compete at the same

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level?

MARIAH LOPEZ: We practice the same as other teams. We'll just practice indoors. If we have to like postpone our games, we'll still get our games in like everyone else, just a little bit later in the season.

ELLESA BONSTROM: I think it's just adjusting to conditions. I mean, we're a team that thrives on just going with the flow, and it didn't doesn't scare us or shock us when it snows a day before we've got to play. It's like, okay, let's get out and shovel the field.

We're definitely a team that thrives on just going with the flow. Yeah, weather conditions may not be great, but we're going to go out and play Utah softball.

Q. What Ellessa was just mentioning about last year, if you missed the postseason, you're on the bubble and you just miss out. Have you seen -- I don't want to say that recollection, but have you seen that drive in your team, and have you fostered that? Or is it something they foster amongst themselves?

AMY HOGUE: Most of the things are things they foster amongst themselves, especially because for this particular moment that happened last year and being a bubble team and not getting selected, it was right before summer. So I don't have any control of what summer looks like for them.

But they took it upon themselves to make sure they did the work like they never have, through the summer and come back in the fall more prepared than ever. Because of that fact, when they started up in the fall, we got to start at a place we've never started before because they were so much more fit and ready to go.

I mean, it raised the bar already, and they did that themselves. Because of that starting point and then that attitude throughout the season, they just built stronger and stronger and got to places they haven't been in a really long time.

Q. For Coach, just the experience of playing Washington, you've done it four times already, very recently in the Pac-12 tournament. How does that experience help knowing that you have beaten them a couple times this year?

AMY HOGUE: We're 2-2 against those guys, very familiar. We're familiar to them. They're familiar with us. So that brings its own challenges.

I like the fact that it's familiar for us because this environment is going to be so unfamiliar that it will give us

one more thing to settle our team, I think, if they look up and aren't used to being in front of 16,000 people, but they see a hitter that we're facing that they are familiar with, it might help comfort them on that first game.

Yeah, they're a great team. It's going to be a battle. It's going to be a chess match, a lot of back and forth, a lot of common knowledge about each other.

It's usually a grind. It's usually a battle. But when we play that many times, usually the score is a little elevated, but because of the intensity of the moment, it's probably going to be whoever can settle in with their nerves the best probably has the advantage.

Q. What do you remember about how the jumping in the pool celebration first started in 1991, and why did you choose to continue it this year with your team?

AMY HOGUE: 1991 was a long time ago. Let's see what I remember about it. I remember we were excited and we won and it was hot. We were in Texas. So we got off the bus, and the gates weren't locked or anything. The pool was just behind the hotel. So we just jumped in. The bus driver got in and everything. That's what I remember about that.

As far as continuing it, it just is fun, and this group wins championships, they do hard things, and then they enjoy what they did, and that's part of it. That's why we have continued it.

Q. Coach Hogue, talk about DJ and Paige and the impact they've had here. Obviously record-setting numbers offensively, great pitching. In Paige's case, obviously having that experience of playing in this setting and having success.

AMY HOGUE: Yeah, how about that staff I have? That was probably some of my best recruiting I've done to date is finding those two. Making them through and through Utah people. They love it.

So DJ runs the hitting program. I think early on he was so eager that he pretty much vomited everything he knew about hitting to our players and probably overwhelmed them at first, but he never slowed down. Like I love the fact that he said, I know all these things, and I want to help you. So hurry and catch up and learn it all as quick as you can.

I think that he's been here long enough now -- and E's a great example of this -- she took what it was he had to say, and it just took a while before she could perform the way that he wanted, meaning to learn the style of hitting he was

teaching.

Now we're very settled in it. It's very exciting to see the progress we've made as a program under his leadership on the hitting side.

As far as Paige goes, she couldn't wait to get time with this one, with Mariah, being a lefty pitcher and knowing what she could help Mariah develop. I'm pretty sure she took the job because she wanted to have her be the first one to lead us here to the World Series. She had it in her mind what it looked like. She's done it before, and here we are.

Q. Mariah and Ellessa, what do the two of you think of the jumping in the pool celebration? And because you guys are basically diving in it, it looks kind of scary. Do you guys ever worry, like the Coach when she flips, getting hurt? Or is anybody maybe not a strong swimmer and choosing not to participate in it?

ELLESSA BONSTROM: That definitely wasn't a thought for any of us. We all just kind of went in, and that was just something that we knew that Utah softball does, so we just went with the tradition. If anyone drowned, we were there to help them up.

Thankfully, that didn't happen, but I will say it is kind of challenging jumping in with full uniforms and trying to swim back up to the top. But we all did it thankfully.

MARIAH LOPEZ: I mean, we were all super excited to jump in and like be part of that tradition. The biggest challenge was just trying not to jump on each other, but that was a lot of fun.

Q. This is for Ellessa and Mariah. Just what's it like being there in Oklahoma City? This is the dream. This is what you've worked your entire lives towards is getting to the college softball World Series, the Women's College World Series. Is the excitement level just palpable for you guys?

ELLESSA BONSTROM: To start, it's very surreal. I know it hasn't started yet, but doing these press conferences and just being here in Oklahoma City, I think all of us have dreamed of being here as little girls, and just to kind of live out that childhood dream is very special.

So, yeah, just trying to soak in every moment that we have here is definitely what we're trying to do.

MARIAH LOPEZ: Yeah, this is definitely the dream, and I think that everyone still is kind of in shock, like this is real. So we're just trying to make the most of it and have a lot of fun together.

THE MODERATOR: That will wrap things up for Utah. Thank you, Amy, Mariah, and Ellessa.

AMY HOGUE: Thank you. Go Utes.

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