

Pac-12 Women's Basketball Media Day

Monday, October 7, 2019



Kelly Graves Satou Sabally Sabrina Ionescu Oregon Ducks

KELLY GRAVES: Well, we're honored to be here, and really excited to have both Sabrina and Satou with me as well. For some of you, maybe you didn't know, but Ruthy Hebard is on her way to Dubai with Team USA in a 3-on-3 tournament.

But anyway, you guys were -- I think a lot has been said about this team. All I know is that we are excited. We've been playing hard and practicing hard, and we're, I think, ready for whatever this season is going to throw at us.

Q. How long do you feel like it took you to get over the Final Four loss?

SABRINA IONESCU: I don't think I'll ever get over it, if you want me to be honest. Obviously now our attention is elsewhere, and we're not really focusing too much on the past and we're focusing on the future. But I mean, I don't think we're ever going to get over that loss, but definitely learning a lot from that game and what we need to do and what we need to improve on.

SATOU SABALLY: Yeah, I feel like that loss is driving us now to do better this year and just taking that experience from that loss and those emotions, like using that more as a motivator rather than being like, oh, we played so bad, oh, we lost this game, more than, hey, we're going to win this next game.

KELLY GRAVES: Honestly, I think I'm a little bit different than our student-athletes in that as a coach, you're always trying to -- it hurts in the moment, but we're always turning the page to what's next. And certainly it was this season, and there's always the recruiting component and everything else that we're doing.

You know, we had such a great season and really had a chance in that semifinal game. We just missed some shots that were a little out of character for us. But we were pretty close, and I think it's made everybody hungry, and it certainly has me as a coach. It inspired me to work harder in the off-season.

Q. What did you work harder on in the off-season? And what did you need -- in your estimation you said that game exposed some things we needed to work on. Sabrina, what are some of those things you needed to work on, and how did you work harder and what did you do harder in the off-season?

KELLY GRAVES: I'm walking more steps every day to keep my head clear so I can coach better.

I think secondly, I've kind of dissected it and looked at why we made the mistakes that we did, and I think just the fact that we're going to be deeper this year is going to help. I thought that that just really hurt us last year. Let's say an injury like Taylor Chavez. Even if she gives Sabrina and Maite two minutes' rest in each half, maybe we don't finish 1 for 13, we've got a few more legs. Because the shots we got were really good. I think secondly I've really turned my attention to the defensive end of the court. And we're so efficient offensively, by far the most efficient offense in the country and the best shooting team in the country, but we're only adequate defensively. So we need to make some better inroads, and I know gaining someone like Minyon Moore really helps in that regard.

SABRINA IONESCU: That's what I was going to say, defensively. I think we've learned a lot from that game, and us guards have to do better at just keeping our players in front of us and our posts have to just get more aggressive on the blocks. So I think on the defensive end, that's where we're going to be taking huge steps this year.

And then offensively, it wasn't easy with not a lot of depth last year, but I mean, we have to push through that. And so just this off-season, getting my shot better and all of us have been shooting the ball really well and working on different ways to score around the basket and on the perimeter.

KELLY GRAVES: I'll go one step further here. Like I said, we had the best true shooting percentage in the nation, points per possession, best turnover rate, on and on and on. But I think our offense is going to be even more dynamic. I think we're trying to stay ahead of everybody else in that regard. So we want to play even faster and share the ball even more.

Q. Kelly, as you look ahead at the schedule, what do you see as some of the more challenging parts? I'm looking at your schedule between January 25th and February 24th. You have eight games on the road and two at home. How do you prepare yourself, and for the athletes, as well, for a stretch like that?

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, well, good question. That really concerns me, and I don't know what the answer is. There's only four teams in the conference this year that play four games in a row on the road during conference play, and we do it -- and those teams do it once. We have to do it twice, so we have two four-game conference road trips, and that's going to be difficult to manage, I think, especially the back-to-back trips to the California schools in February late in the season.

But we're not going to make excuses. I mean, that's the schedule we got. It's not ideal, but we're going to make the most of it, and I think if any team can handle it, it's this group. We have experienced veterans who have been around the block and won at a high level, and I think that's been one of our strengths as a program. We don't make excuses, we'll do whatever we have to do.

But yeah, that's not ideal. And quite frankly, our non-league schedule, we were as aggressive as any team in the country having to go to UConn, to Syracuse. We play Louisville and Oklahoma State on neutral sites, and then we host Kansas State and then South Dakota State, the team we beat in the Sweet 16 this year at home.

So it's aggressive, and then you get into Pac-12 play, it's the best this league has ever been since I've been coaching in the northwest. I don't think it's ever been deeper or ever been better at the top.

Q. Sabrina and Kelly, the Play For Pay law from California has been in the news here the last few weeks. How do you feel like a law, if that ever comes to fruition, would affect players like you?

SABRINA IONESCU: I mean, I haven't thought too much about it just because I'm just so busy with basketball. But I mean, I hope whatever they decide to do, I hope everything is in the best interest of the student-athletes. And in that regard, I know it's just been passed in California and a couple other states, but hopefully we continue to figure out what's going to be best for the student-athletes.

KELLY GRAVES: I thought she said it perfectly. Same here. I think whatever we can do to help the student-athlete experience, I think, is important. However, I am one who believes that there is value in a scholarship. I

mean, that is real money. I remember doing the math one time somewhere, I can't remember what it was, if you divide the amount of the scholarship -- and that doesn't include all the perks that you get as a student-athlete - and you divide that into the total number of hours we're allowed to work our student-athletes out, they're still making well over \$100 an hour to be basketball players. That's real money, and that's the best part-time job they're ever going to have.

But at the same time, I do see it on the horizon, and I would support that. I truly do believe that they work really hard, and there's value in sharing some of that for them.

Q. Sabrina, you've already accomplished so much and maybe it's different from when you were a freshman coming in. What's driving you personally this season?

SABRINA IONESCU: I mean, just it being my last season and to help this team. They've given so much to me, and that's ultimately why I came back for my senior year is because of the people that are around me and that sacrificed so much for me. So coming back, just super excited to get back with the team and continue to be the best role model, the best basketball player, the best person that I can be ultimately what drives me.

Q. Sabrina, you already kind of touched on what I was about to ask you, but can you talk a little bit more about what went into your decision process? You could have gone to the WNBA, been a top 3, top 4 pick, maybe the No. 1 pick. Talk about that decision process of coming back for your senior year?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah, it wasn't easy just because I had a few hours after my game to decide what I was going to do. So I just sat down and kind of wrote down the pros and cons to both decisions and tried to make the best decision for myself. I mean, I did make the best decision. I'm really happy that I stayed and didn't really jump into going pro so soon. And so obviously wanting to play along Satou and some of the great players that we have returning and obviously some of the new players that we have coming in, and just spending my last year with our coaching staff and those people that believed in me when I was in high school is what I wanted.

Q. For both players, what is the difference between being early in your careers kind of an up-and-coming team and then being a favorite, being somebody that people talk about for a title or whatever? How does it change your mentality? How does it change your preparation? Does it change anything?

SABRINA IONESCU: For me personally, it doesn't change anything at all. I mean, every day that I step foot on the practice court, in the gym, I try and be the best basketball player that I can, regardless of if we're a 10 seed, if we're a 1 seed, whatever seed we are. Obviously outside expectations are different on us this year. Seeding is different. All that stuff, all that outside noise is different.

But for us internally and for our program, I think we all view each other the same, and our goal is the same. We're going to come in and be the hardest-working team. I think if we come in with that mindset individually, that helps us collectively, and we're starting off really strong. Practices have been the best they've ever been in my three years at Oregon, so I'm excited to see where we continue to grow.

SATOU SABALLY: Yeah, I'm actually feeling more confident than before because now I really know what I'm playing for. I've mentioned that earlier on to Sabrina. Like in my freshman year, I was still trying to figure out what exactly I was playing for, like especially from coming overseas. I did not really know what an NCAA Tournament is like. Just experiencing that the first time was really tough and losing in the Elite 8 was really tough. But now I really feel confident, okay, I know what this is about, we've been practicing really hard, and it's been a lot of fun. So yeah, just really motivated.

Q. Coach, quick question for you and for Satou. You mentioned Minyon Moore. If you can help us understand how quickly she's picking things up, et cetera, and when you lose Maite, you lose an awful lot. You had stressed our best player is Maite, with all due respect to the women up there with you. How Moore is helping you. And Satou, when your sister goes down again, injury is already a factor. Are you playing for your sister now more than anything else, and is it rude of me to ask if perhaps that brings you back next year so you can at least get -- will that at least be something you think about after this season so you might get to play one year with her at least?

SATOU SABALLY: I mean, I'm not trying to think of next year. Obviously I really want to play with my sister. I know she's going to be back, and I'm really proud of her for how she's handled the situation because it is really tough. I don't know a lot of people that have handled the situation that mature as she has. But yeah, like obviously I'm sad about it, and I'm definitely playing for her this season.

KELLY GRAVES: Yeah, there's no doubt we're going to miss Maite. She was a rock for us, four-year starter at the hardest position. What she did is she took a lot of

pressure off Sabrina as a primary ball handler so Sabrina could play more off the ball and make more happen in the half court. We're going to miss her, there's no question about it.

But I think Minyon is going to be stellar there. She gives us a whole different kind of attitude, especially on the defensive end. You know, she knows what we're about. She's competed against us for three years and she knows what our program is like. What she has to do is she's got to -- the one thing I think you can say about the Ducks is we play under control. And she's got to continue to do that, and she will because she's a very bright young woman and a very bright player. I think her and Sabrina played club ball together, so they have a lifelong relationship. And I think that really helps. I think Minyon really looks up to Sabrina, and I think that's mutual, so you can see that there's already synergy on the court.

But I'll tell you what, she talks. We spend, I don't know, as coaches, forever, trying to get our teams to talk, talk, talk on the court. Well, that comes natural to Minyon. She is a talker, and I think it is becoming infectious with the rest of the team. She is a great teammate. When Nyara hurt, the first person that reached out in the group text was Minyon, and she wasn't even in Eugene yet. You know, that's just kind of who she is, and I think this gives her a chance to really showcase her game.

We're going to be a very visible team, and I think this is good for her, and I think she's got a bright pro future, as well.

Q. Sabrina, you mentioned you had just a few hours to make this decision if you were coming back, going pro. What were those hours like for you? That's such a big life decision. Did you feel rushed? Were you nervous? What were those moments like?

SABRINA IONESCU: I mean, honestly, I procrastinate a lot, so I waited until like the last 30 minutes to really decide.

KELLY GRAVES: You remember she showed up on campus in June, right?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah, similar to my college decision. And so I was pretty calm. I mean, obviously when it was crunch time and I had to make a decision, I started to get a little nervous and anxious and kind of was doubting which decision was right for me. I was getting a lot of phone calls and texts from people back home, family asking what I had decided and people kind of wanting to have their input on my decision.

But I went on a walk -- I was in Tampa and I kind of

went on a walk. And my twin brother had met me, and I just knew -- I was like, there's no way that I can call him or my team and tell them that I'm going to be leaving. It just didn't feel right. So at that moment, I just knew that it's meant for me to stay for my last year. And so I called him and he put me on speaker with his entire family and could hear them all yelling, and then obviously told my team, and they were super excited. And it was just like kind of a sigh of relief after that, and I was just ready to get back to work.

Q. Kelly, I was just wondering if you could elaborate on what you're saying about the strength at the top of the conference and also that middle tier, what kind of gap there might be. Is that changing at all as far as some of the other teams?

KELLY GRAVES: Well, yeah, I think 1 through 12, I truly believe that. I think Arizona was in the 8-9 game last year in our Pac-12 tournament and they win the postseason WNIT. That's incredible. I think this season it's going to be that same kind of depth.

You know, I don't think it matters who you're playing where. You'd better bring it or you're going to be in trouble. Then the teams at the top, I think we have four teams projected in the top ten. I don't know if that's ever happened, and it usually doesn't happen with any conference.

So I think that's really, really unique, and we truly have, I think, four -- not only Final Four contenders, but I think contenders for National Championships. I truly believe we'll be in that discussion, and it's deserved.

I think we'll -- it's going to be -- I don't see anybody going 18-0 in conference. I think we're going to beat each other up like we always seem to do, and I think that battle tests us for the NCAA Tournament.

I do know this, that when we get to the NCAA -- and Sabrina has won 10 games in the NCAA Tournament in her three years at Oregon -- I know we're ready. We've seen it all in conference play. We've played against the best, and so what we see in the NCAA sometimes is actually easier than what we're playing against in conference.

Great coaches -- I mean, I look at Tara. My goodness, she's a Hall of Fame coach and she has nine McDonald's All-Americans. Nine. That is a loaded basketball team. I think they are the team -- I think we're getting some of that attention, but that's a team, Stanford, that you'd better watch out for. I know we're -- they're going to be tough, two great games for us, both on national TV, which is, I think, a great showcase, two great programs and a great conference.

The middle tier, I don't know. You tell me who the

middle tier is going to be. I have no idea. You know, I have no idea. I think anybody could step up there. We have a lot of new faces in the conference, some great coaches, and so we'll let it all play out.

Q. What was your reaction when Sabrina was coming back? And what was going through your mind during that whole thing? It completely changes your team whether she's there or whether she's not, and just sharing it with your family on the speaker phone.

KELLY GRAVES: Well, when she talked about it, it was my family -- it's our family. My three sons are like Sabrina's brothers. We -- and I know they consider Sabrina family. I'd had -- honestly I thought the whole time, I felt positive about the fact she was going to come back. I think she put a little pressure on herself and us when she used the term unfinished business. I love that. I think that's great, and that's what Sabrina is. She's out there. I mean, she's a humble player, but she's very confident, and I think that was great.

But we were at home. I had gone home Saturday after we lost on Friday, and a lot of the players -- most of the team actually stayed in Tampa with their families. So I did not have contact with Sabrina for more than a day. And so you just never know who's in her ear and helping her make this decision and what happens because I wasn't there.

But she really made our day when she had called us beforehand. Even though right before she had called it kind of broke on Twitter that she was going pro. Somebody made a false statement, they made an error, and we had seen that first, and then Sabrina called us and --

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah, that was scary.

KELLY GRAVES: I think it was great, and personally, I think it was a great decision for her. Obviously I told her that I would support and love her, and she can attest to this, whatever she decides to do. She is always family to us.

But Sabrina, like she'd said, the unfinished business. But you guys, Sabrina has a chance to do some things that have never been done in college basketball, ever, by men's basketball players or women's basketball players. She's on pace to become a 2,000 points, 1,000 rebounds, 1,000 assists players. That's never been done, ever. I know she is -- that's not what she's about, but she has a chance to really be the face of college basketball, and I don't think just women's basketball. When you say the name Sabrina, casual men's basketball fans know who you're talking about. Unless there's another Zion coming down the pike

here, and I don't think there is, I think Sabrina really becomes the face of the college game. And I'm really proud of her because there is nobody that can handle that better than she can. She handles everything with grace and poise, and when I travel around with her, you guys, it's like I'm with a rock star.

And with Satou, too, and with Ruthy and the whole team. We're at the Wooden awards post-game party, or the post-show party, and there's Kareem and Karl Malone and Dr. J and Jerry West. And I go up and introduce myself, I'm Kelly Graves, and they look and whatever. And they say, I'm Sabrina's coach. Coach, great to meet you, I love Sabrina, I've seen your team play many times.

So I'm now going around saying I'm Sabrina's coach and that's how I get street cred. But I'm really proud of her and how she's handled everything and there's not a day that goes by that she probably doesn't get half a dozen requests for an autograph during the day or a picture or whatever, and I've just never seen her act anything but love to do it.