

Contrasting styles meet when Oregon, Baylor collide in Final Four

By Fred Goodall
The Associated Press

TAMPA, Florida — Kim Mulkey rejects the notion that being the No. 1 overall seed makes Baylor the team to beat in the women's Final Four.

The Lady Bears (35-1), who are riding a 27-game winning streak and have trounced four opponents in the NCAA Tournament by an average of 38 points, face Final Four newcomer Oregon (33-4) in Friday's national semifinals.

The winner advances to Sunday's championship against either UConn or Notre Dame.

Mulkey, who's won titles as a player and an assistant coach at Louisiana Tech in addition to guiding Baylor to a pair of NCAA crowns, said it would be a mistake to assume the Lady Bears are clearcut favorites.

"We don't approach it like: 'Oh, wow, we're the No. 1 seed, we're supposed to win.' According to a lot of people, we're not supposed to win," Mulkey said.

"We're going to fight. We're going to claw. We're going to compete. We're going to give it our best shot,"

she added. "I'm sure the other three teams are going to do the same thing."

Oregon promises as much.

Led by All-American point guard Sabrina Ionescu, the Ducks are in the Final Four for the first time after upsetting another No. 1 seed, Mississippi State, in the Elite Eight.

"We're honored and humbled to be here, but I think we all know we don't want to go home tomorrow," Ionescu said after practice Thursday at Amalie Arena. "We didn't just come here to enjoy the experience. We came here to win some more basketball games."

Baylor is back in the Final Four for the time since 2012, when it finished a 40-0 season and captured its second national title.

The Lady Bears are led by an imposing frontcourt featuring 6-foot-4 Lauren Cox and 6-7 Kalani Brown and use their size to dominate on both ends of the floor.

Oregon, meanwhile, plays a contrasting perimeter-oriented style that coach Kelly Graves acknowledged has prompted

some people to call the Ducks the Golden State Warriors of women's college basketball.

"Steph Curry gave Sabrina quite a shout-out yesterday. I thought that was really cool," Graves said. "You know what, yeah, she's a lot like Steph, how he's a conductor, is always a threat to make a huge play, make those 3-pointers."

Baylor's Caitlin Bickle said "they're calling it new school versus old school."

"We work from the inside out, and I think they work from outside in," Bickle added. "So we're just kind of opposite."

Mulkey said teams generally play do whatever they feel is necessary to be successful.

"You play to your personnel," the Baylor coach said.

"I guess you could call me old, if you want to. You can call me old-fashioned. I'm good with all of it," Mulkey added. "I just play to win."

STRENGTH VS. STRENGTH

Oregon is first in the nation in 3-point shooting percentage (41.7 and

third in overall field goal percentage (50.5%). The Ducks are 12th in 3-pointers attempted with 869 and fourth in 3-pointers made with 362.

Baylor, meanwhile, leads the country in field goal percentage defense at 31.4%.

"I think our defense is special," Mulkey said, adding it may be the most underrated aspect of Baylor's success.

"Yes, we've scored a lot of points in these playoff games, which we're very capable of doing," she added. "But we don't know we're going to do that every night. I don't think any team can go and think how many points are we going

to score. Our approach is we know what we can do defensively."

BIG ... AND TALENTED

Oregon figures to have its hands full, too, defensively.

Brown averages 15.5 points per game for the Lady Bears, while Cox (12.9), Chloe Jackson (11.4) and Juicy Landrum (11.3) also average double figures.

"They're not just tall, they're skilled," Graves said. "It looks like sometimes they play volleyball with each other. They're just throwing it up and over the opponents."

IONESCU MAKES 'EM GO

Mulkey doesn't want to reveal Baylor's game plan,

but said it's no secret the Lady Bears have to contain Ionescu.

"That's where I start and probably stop in answering your question," Mulkey said. "All those kids know she makes them better. She'll get the ball to them in spots where it makes them look good. She certainly is not the only great player on that team, but it starts and stops with her."

WORDS ARE JUST WORDS

Geno Auremma, which has UConn in the Final Four for the 12th consecutive years, said this week that he feels Notre Dame — the Huskies' opponent in the semifinals — has the best team in the country. ■

SILVEIRA

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to stay in shape for football. At the time, he was largely a sprinter, and said running "the 400 was even pushing it for me."

"Distance (running) was an evil thing," he said.

But track teammates Tim Stevens and Alex Graffunder were among those who kept insisting that Silveira consider being a distance runner and join the Union/Cove cross country team.

Coincidentally, it was Silveira who in seventh grade convinced Stevens to join Cove's track team. Now, the roles were reversed.

"He took that and ran with it, no pun intended," Silveira said. "He really put his heart and soul into (track, and) he brought me into (cross country)."

Silveira did run a 1,500 during his freshman year, which made it possible to envision distance running.

"I got a little bit of a

taste," he said.

He went out for football as a sophomore as the quarterback for the Leopards, but finally made the switch to cross country his junior year.

It was a tough move, he said, because football had been his love from a young age, and he was a key piece of the Cove football team.

Not to mention he also had to learn how to be a distance runner.

"The learning curve on getting yourself to compete for that long is huge," he said. He added, though, that he "had the resources to learn. Tim, Alex, all my coaches — (DJ) Fox, (Steve) Sheehy. They're all resources to learn what it takes to run at that level. I got to be a student of the game."

He has since logged the mileage to propel himself into one of the top Class 2A/1A runners. He took fifth overall — and second on the team — during last fall's state cross country championships. He was

also second in both the 800 and 3,000 during the 1A state track championships last spring.

And he's gone from dreading a 400 to now running roughly 60 miles a week, training frequently with Stevens.

"We do the same weekly mileage and daily mileage," he said. "We're typically together four to five days a week."

Which events he'll run at EOU isn't set, but his focus isn't on the Mountaineers just yet.

He hopes to get his health level back to 100 percent — he's working through a calf injury — to see what the Leopards track team can accomplish in the spring.

After all, before striving for the ultimate goal of a title in college, he'd like to help lift the Leopards as high as possible.

"The big goal we talk about is we want to see what we can do at state," he said. ■

TIGERS

Continued from Page 8A

perspective," Wright said. "It's a great learning opportunity for us to grow, and it goes to show we have room for improvement, and we'll take it at that."

Brock concurred with her coach.

"What we take away from that is we need to be a little more controlled and finish a little stronger. Besides that I think the girls did great," she said.

Brock and her counterpart from Pendleton, Sami Spriet, matched zeroes on the scoreboard after the first. The La Grande junior finished with 10 strikeouts in the loss, allowing four runs on seven hits. At times she was dominant, recording strikeouts of all three batters in the fifth inning on 10 pitches. She also worked out of a two-on, no-out jam in the top of the fourth to keep the

score at 2-0.

Spriet, meanwhile, allowed three runs on seven hits, walked three batters and struck out three.

Both Wright and Brock said the team did struggle at times to adjust to the speed of Spriet's pitching after seeing faster pitching at a tournament in Idaho last weekend.

"She was a little bit slower, and coming from such fast pitching to a little slower may have messed with the girls' timing a little bit," Brock said. "We still hit pretty good, just not timely."

The Tigers' first-inning offense came with two outs. Jayce Seavert, who went 2-for-3, doubled to left-centerfield, and Brock followed with a shot over the fence in left-center for the lead.

La Grande (7-1 overall) travels to Ontario Saturday to begin Greater Oregon League play. ■

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