

Nebraska sweeps Oregon Ducks volleyball out of NCAA Tournament in regional final

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MINNEAPOLIS — Even after a huge upset victory the night before and becoming the second team in Oregon volleyball history to make it this far, seeing the season end is still tough for players.

Oregon junior Ronika Stone paused while giving an answer in the postgame news conference as she started to cry after Oregon's three-set loss to Nebraska on Saturday.

"I think it just hit me," Stone said, wiping tears from her eyes. "It's disappointing."

Another upset wasn't in the cards as No. 15 Oregon lost 25-22, 25-23, 25-17 to No. 7 Nebraska in the Elite Eight of the NCAA volleyball tournament Saturday at Maturi Pavilion. The Ducks (23-11) lost to the defending national champion Cornhuskers team (28-6) that will make its fourth consecutive appearance in the Final Four.

Oregon finished the match with a .250 hitting percentage, the highest of any Nebraska opponent this season other than Minnesota. Oregon coach Matt Ulmer was happy with the way his team played, going point-for-point in the first two sets and scoring well enough to stay in the match.

The Ducks grabbed early leads the first two sets but couldn't close them out. At the end of the first set, four of the last five Nebraska points came on Oregon errors before Nebraska took the 1-0 match lead on a kill from senior outside hitter Mikaela Foecke.

“I thought we made some uncharacteristic communication plays, and that cost us,” Ulmer said.

In the second set, Oregon led by as many as five points at 12-7 before a late 6-1 run from Nebraska gave it a 20-19 lead before closing the set with a pair of kills.

Down two sets, Ulmer called a timeout early in the third set because he thought his players — with a hitting percentage of .300 in the match at the time — were trying to change how they scored points.

“That’s kind of been our M.O.,” Ulmer said. “When things go bad, we try to do too much.”

Nebraska took control to finish off the sweep. Nebraska coach John Cook said his team adjusted in the third, trying to jam up Oregon players such as Stone and junior Willow Johnson. Nebraska also got the block going, recording three of its five blocks in the third set. It was all about disrupting the Ducks’ rhythm, “because they were humming,” Cook said.

Cook later recalled defeating Oregon in 2015 and at the time telling his assistants to “look out for Oregon,” noticing the players on the Ducks’ side who were freshmen and now seniors.

“For them to come in here and beat Minnesota, we know how hard that is,” Cook said. “It is monumental to be able to do that.

“(Oregon) made us feel very uncomfortable today, and we’re not used to that.”

But the Ducks also didn’t have enough answers for Nebraska middle blocker Lauren Stivrins and Foecke, who was named the most outstanding player of the regional. Foecke led the way with 16 kills and 13 digs for the fourth double-double of her NCAA tournament career. Stivrins finished with 11 kills.

Nebraska had the better marks in kills (48-42), digs (53-47) and hitting percentage (.345 to .250). Stone led the Ducks with nine kills after recording a career-high 20 kills against Minnesota on Friday.

After the match, Oregon freshman Brooke Nuneviller, who had 19 digs in the match, reflected on how this season was a changing point in the program.

“I mean, obviously we haven’t made it this far since 2012, and I just see so much talent in the future and so much potential that we can just keep growing off of moments like this,” Nuneviller said.