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Sports

Oregon Ducks volleyball knocks off Minnesota, one win away from NCAA Final Four

By Heather Rule For The Register-Guard

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MINNEAPOLIS — Go ahead and label this volleyball match as a thriller.

No. 15 seeded Oregon defeated No. 2 seeded Minnesota in front of the maroon-and-gold home crowd with a 21-25, 41-39, 25-14, 26-24 victory in the NCAA Sweet 16 that took nearly 2 hours, 30 minutes on Friday at Maturi Pavilion.

“We’re not done yet,” senior setter August Raskie said.

It’s the second time in Oregon’s history the squad has made it to the Elite Eight.

Before the match, Ducks coach Matt Ulmer talked with his players about making memories in the tournament. Friday will go down as “an unforgettable” memory for Raskie, who recorded a triple-double with 60 assists, 11 digs and 10 kills.

The Gophers took the back-and-forth first set, but the story of the match was the marathon second set which included 26 tie scores, 57 kills, 61 digs, 17 set point opportunities and four challenges.

“We decided at the beginning of this game that no matter what, we were going to be fearless in everything that we did, so I think that just helped us to be disciplined and just play with no fear through all of those points,” Raskie said.

Oregon took a 19-15 lead before Minnesota came back with a 7-2 run for a 22-21 lead. Then the Ducks got three straight kills from junior Ronika Stone to save a trio of set points. Stone finished with 10 kills in the set and a team-high 20 for the match.

The Gophers thought they had won the set at 39-37, but a challenge from the Ducks dropped the score back to 38-38. Minnesota's Samantha Seliger-Swenson thought she pancaked the ball, keeping it off the floor to help the Gophers win the point. But the call was overturned.

Oregon finally ended the set on its eighth set-point chance — 41-39 — with a pair of kills from Brooke Van Sickle, who had just four kills in the match. The Ducks hadn't been through something quite like that set before, according to senior Lindsey Vander Weide.

"There's definitely been a lot of close games," Vander Weide said. "That one just took a little longer. It's just more fun."

It seemed to crush the momentum for their opponents, too.

"A little bit of a bait and switch there," said Gophers coach Hugh McCutcheon, of the almost-win in the second set. "But that's the way it works out, and we got our heart broken a little bit. It took us a while to recover, I think that was clear. The start of the third set would be indicative of that."

The Ducks dominated the third set, starting with three blocks from Lauren Page and a 10-2 run as Minnesota scrambled to get something going. Oregon won five of the final six points in the match to seal the victory, ending with a kill from Stone.

Vander Weide finished with 17 kills and 18 digs while junior Willow Johnson added 15 kills and 10 digs. The Ducks hit .313 compared to the Gophers hitting .260.

The Gophers, who came in having won 22 of 23 matches, finish the season with four losses — two of those to the Ducks. Oregon also defeated Minnesota on Sept. 7 in a tournament at Stanford.

Oregon will face No. 7 seed Nebraska at 3 p.m. Saturday with a chance to move on to the Final Four. Ulmer joked Friday that it would not be easy to come down and recover from their victory over the Gophers.

“It’s a very emotional match,” Ulmer said. “It’s not going to be easy, and you only get to play the best teams so we’re happy we’re in it.”