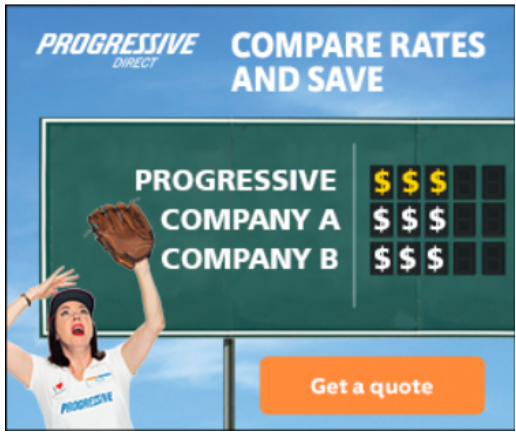
Oklahoma ends James Madison's Historic WCWS Run to Reach the Finals

Fifth-year senior Odicci Alexander was a breakout pitching start for James Madison University in this year's NCAA Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki)

By Laurie Lauletta-Boshart June 7, 2021



OKLAHOMA CITY — The Cinderella story did not quite have the fairytale ending that underdog James Madison University had hoped for, as they dropped back-to-back Women's College World Series games against four-time national champion Oklahoma to bring its season and championship run to a close. The unseeded, non-power five team from Harrisonburg, Va., stunned the nation and softball powerhouse Oklahoma, by pulling out a 4-3 upset win over the top-seeded team in its first ever WCWS appearance. The Dukes followed their inaugural win with a 2-1 victory over Oklahoma State, garnering the first ever 2-0 WCWS start from an unseeded team. Led by fifth-year senior Odicci Alexander — who returned to JMU for the additional senior season allotted by the NCAA due to the COVID-19 pandemic — learned to pitch by watching YouTube videos and practicing on a homemade block wall fashioned by her grandfather. Alexander's highlight-reel diving tag that prevented Oklahoma State base runner Scotland David from scoring, was played over and over again to the delight of teammates and fans. The unlikely front-runners captured the hearts of little girls everywhere with their gritty work ethic and grind-it-out style of play.

Unaccustomed to playing out of the loser' s bracket, but far from out of the series, Oklahoma went on a terror after dropping the opener to win back-to-back games and stave off elimination, first run-ruling Georgia in an 8-0 crushing victory, then claiming a 10-3 decisive win against defending champion UCLA. That set the stage for a grudge rematch between Oklahoma and JMU on Sunday morning. The teams appeared to be evenly matched, with a 3-3 tie holding until the top of the seventh inning when Oklahoma sophomore catcher Kinzie Hansen hit a three-run homer to clinch the win and force the if-necessary game. After a nearly two-hour rain delay, the afternoon game was moved to the following day instead of later that night. Oklahoma head coach Patty Gasso was vocal about the need to protect the student athletes after the NCAA had allowed Florida State and Oklahoma State to play a Saturday night game that finished after 2 a.m. the following morning. "The NCAA needs to make good on their claims about protecting the student- athlete and do something about the schedule," says Gasso. "Having players getting home at three in the morning and trying to prepare for the next day isn't good for anyone."

In Monday's if-necessary matchup between JMU and OU, Alexander faced off against fifth-year Oklahoma senior, G. Juarez. JMU put an immediate stamp on the game when leadoff batter Kate Gordon hit a solo home run on the first pitch to give the Dukes the first points on the scoreboard. Alexander kept the Sooners' bats at bay until the bottom of the fourth inning, when red-shirt senior Nicole Mendes hit a leadoff triple and scored on a wild pitch. Senior Lynnsie Elam reached on a fielder's choice and came around to score on Jana Johns' double, moving the Sooners ahead 2-1. Oklahoma broke the scoring wide open with a four-run, fifth inning pair of two-out, two-run doubles from outfielders Mackenzie Donihoo and Jayda Coleman, padding OU's lead by five. Alexander was visibly shaken and had been working to fend off the pain from a toe injury she sustained in a previous game. Head coach Loren LaPorte signaled for freshman pitcher Alissa Humphrey to take over in the circle. "Odicci has been simply outstanding for us in the series," says LaPorte. "Nothing can take away from her tremendous performance." Alexander received a standing ovation from Oklahoma and JMU fans alike when she left the field.

Humphrey, who was making her WCWS debut, was able to stop the OU momentum with an inning-ending force out at third. Juarez quickly retired the next three out of four JMU batters to give her team one last at bat in the top of the seventh. USA Softball Player of the Year, Jocelyn Alo, who was hitless on the night, started off the inning by belting a towering home run over the left field fence, extending the Sooners' lead to six. Humphrey finished out the inning without any further scoring damage.

In JMU's last at bat, Juarez, who was commanding in the circle after giving up the first inning home run to Gordon, closed out the game and garnered her third straight win of the series. She limited the Dukes to just four hits and one run in the game, and finished the night with 11 strikeouts. "Juarez has been here before," says Gasso, "which helps a lot in these pressure-filled kind of games. She just stayed focused and put up a tremendous game to give us a shot at another championship."

Oklahoma will face Florida State in the best-of-three Championship Series, which starts at 4:30p.m. PDT on Tuesday, June 8. Both teams played out of the loser's bracket to reach the finals, making history in the process.

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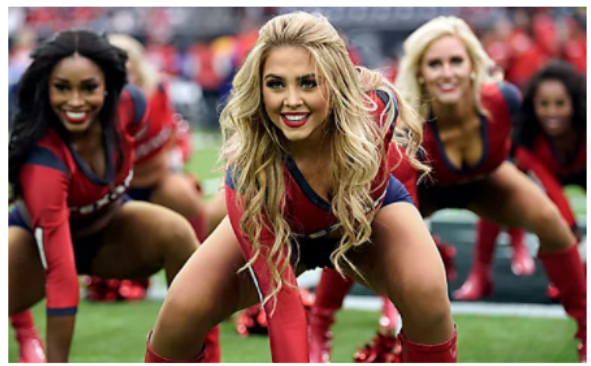

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