

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 8, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

Malia Samuels

Avery Howell

Postgame Press Conference

USC - 82, Michigan - 70

THE MODERATOR: We're going to go ahead and get started with the USC portion of today's press conference. Joining us is Coach Lindsay Gottlieb, Avery Howell and Malia Samuels.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First, I have to start with crediting Michigan. We had to win that game. We had to earn that game. They gave us nothing. So impressed by KBA and the job she's done this year.

She and I saw each other recruiting this summer. You know how things go. They lost some kids in the portal. She had some freshmen coming in. To see from the unknown to what they've become is a credit to their culture, their players. They've had a great year, and we'll be rooting for them in the NCAA Tournament.

Super proud of our team. I think this shows exactly how far we've come. We had to earn this one. We got better throughout the game offensively against their pressure. I thought we had to come together and have a fight, which we did. I thought we got contributions from everywhere.

Obviously Ju and Kiki cannot be guarded by one person, and they showed you and did their thing, but we are not where we are without the contributions of our leadership. I thought Rayah coming off her illness held us together, held it down, made her buckets. Kim's got cramps with the way she defends.

These two here who are also young -- Avery's a freshman, Malia's a sophomore -- I thought changed momentum, changed tempo, and we don't get where we want to get to without this whole group. I thought this was on display



today, and these two are a huge part of that.

I'm really proud of the group and onto the next.

Q. It was obviously a tight back-and-forth game, and then you rolled off 14 consecutive points, which was pretty incredible. What was it like in the middle of that run? What went into it, and what did it feel like to be out there when it was happening?

MALIA SAMUELS: It was super exciting to be out there. I knew our run was coming. We were due for a run, and I just heard Rayah during our timeout saying, this group is going to get a run, this group is going to get a run. So I think that really helped us get it going, and it was super exciting to be out there.

Q. Malia, you have this really impressive defensive sequence in the second where there was this really nice block into a steal. You guys were playing from behind a lot in the first. I mean, most of the first. How do you keep up that defensive intensity when you're playing with your back up against the wall like that?

MALIA SAMUELS: Just having my team's back is the main thing. I know my role coming off the bench, I'm in there to make a run go or start defense. I think that's the main thing is just wanting to help my team and do the best thing for my team regardless of our backs being against the wall. If we're up 20, down 20, it doesn't matter to me.

Q. Last time you played Michigan, they didn't have Syla Swords. Tonight she was the leading scorer. Just what impact did she have on the game today, and what new look does she give you?

AVERY HOWELL: I think that Syla -- obviously I'm on the Canadian national team with Syla, so I've known her for a while. But I think she plays with a lot of heart, a lot of passion. Definitely we knew that was going to be a difference maker for their team for sure.

I think our team coming in knew that and were prepared for that and did our best to guard her any way we could -- switching, communicating. But I think she had a really



good game and gave it her all for sure.

Q. Avery, it seems like you're one of the -- I would say the most reliable shooter from around the perimeter from three. What kind of goes into your preparation to be ready for those moments? You had only 3 points in the first half, and you stepped up in the fourth quarter when your team needed you. What was kind of the feeling going into it and the mindset of closing out the game to reach the championship?

EVERY HOWELL: I think for myself as a 3-point shooter, it's just preparation. I'm always in the gym, always getting shots up. Any time my coach needs me to execute a play or get a shot for our team, I am prepared, and I try to execute to the best of my abilities.

I think today obviously Ju and Kiks are getting guarded really hard, so there was more opening for me to get shots. I wasn't super hot from three today, so I tried to get other things to work out, leaking out, getting layups. Malia found me around the rim a couple times. I knew that fourth quarter was going to be huge for our team, and I just tried to show up in any way I could.

Q. JuJu was held pretty well by Michigan in the first half, but then in the second half, Kiki stepped up and kind of kick-started your offense. I wonder if you could talk about what it's like to play with her?

EVERY HOWELL: I think Kiki is a huge presence as well, so is JuJu. I think Kiki is so lethal from the elbow that she has to be guarded, but then she can get down that lane line. So I think she's super challenging for anyone to try to guard.

Then her decision-making ability to take a dribble if they slide over, kicking it out to a three or skipping it across the court, I just think she has so many different versions to her game it makes her really hard to defend.

Q. Avery, you had this really nice run in the fourth with JuJu. You guys were back and forth with the scoring and pushing the team on that run. Can you speak to the intensity of playing such an important role in these moments as a freshman?

EVERY HOWELL: It's the position I want to be in obviously. I'm confident. I am very vocal, so I feel like being in those situations it's super fun and exciting, and I'm a really big competitor, so I love those moments. Obviously our team has super high standards and expectations for our team and so do our coaches. I think we execute that every day in practice.

So I think stepping onto the floor, it's just kind of like our situations in practice and we're all out there together playing for each other. I think it's honestly a lot of fun to just be out there.

Q. You guys are in the championship game. Do you have a preference whether you get UCLA for a third time or get Ohio State?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: (Laughs) That's going to be a no. Whoever wins, we'll be ready to play.

Q. Obviously not the best shooting day for JuJu, but she had a play that sparked -- I felt sparked that 14-0 run where she was doubled, she kind of squeezed through the two defenders, made a leaning jumper. What does it say about her that she sticks with it in situations like that and leads the team even on what is not her best day?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We say not her best day because she's got three and four bodies on her all the time, and to still end up with 20 and 11.

I thought she showed a lot of poise. It was probably frustrating. She was getting trapped and doubled when she's with the ball in her hands. Tried to get her some looks kind of underneath the defense, but there were a lot of bodies there.

I thought her poise was really good today. I thought we tried to use her as a screener a bit in the second half and get Kiki free. I thought she played off that really well.

I thought her decision-making was good. She had a couple, no matter how many bodies there were, she has the ability to slide through and finish and finish through contact. She made some good decisions where she was able to drop it off to Kiki or found Avery on a spray.

I thought she was all there the entire time today and found ways to impact the game in so many ways. I thought she was really, really good defensively also.

Q. Coach, under 30 points in the first half and then over 50 in the second half. What do you think kick-started your offense in the second?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First of all, Michigan is a really good defensive team. We had to find those spots. We had to handle their pressure. I knew we'd eventually knock down some shots. I thought we got some good looks that didn't go in the first half, but really it was almost like an attitude shift for us to be the aggressors and take it at them. I thought that was a key to get going as well.

I thought we got to the free-throw line more as well because I thought we were more aggressive to get the ball where it needed to go in the paint, whether that was off the bounce or with post touches.

Q. Seeing Sylva Swords for the first time, how did she change the game for Michigan? Also, what did you notice that was different about playing Michigan the second time this season?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's terrific. She is so good. I thought her release was quicker live than I had seen on film. But she's just a really complete player. She's a competitor.

I know that Team Canada and Michigan all think so highly of her. I saw her a ton at Lu High because we have a player from Lu High as well, but to see her at this level and come with the ability to cut and finish around the basket and a quick trigger from three, just a really, really impressive player.

Q. Avery came up really big in a couple plays in both games. Could you kind of describe her style of play and what you see down the pike for her?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She is such a competitor. I know the shooting kind of jumps off the page, and she is a great shooter. It's one thing to put the work in practice. It's another thing to hit the shots in big games, which she does. It's that competitive fire, that competitive nature.

She's just incredibly tough. She didn't turn the ball over in 28 minutes. She obviously provides a lot of gravity for us, so we're going to get better touches for Kiki if she's on the side because you can't leave her as a shooter.

But really it's that desire and kind of killer instinct that she has that, I think, as a freshman has allowed her to be very vocal and be very confident and impact the game for us in a lot of ways.

Q. It's been a while since you played Michigan, a couple of months. What kind of growth have you seen from all of their freshmen from high school to that game to this game? I know next year is not top of mind for you, but what can that program do with them?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I thought they were good last time. Obviously we didn't see Sylva live. I think they've been good. I think it's the consistency of excellence. I think they've won 8 out of 10 coming into this game.

They play hard. They're complete players. They can shoot

or drive it. I think the freshmen are really good, but I think we'd be remiss if we didn't talk about Jordan Hobbs and her leadership with that group and the way she plays, which I think allows those young ones to also do their thing.

I'll probably text KBA later. You say it after the game, but the moment's a very quick moment. Just I think their growth has been tremendous, and we had to win this game. It wasn't something that was given to us in any way.

They play hard and they're a really good team, and they've gotten better. Credit to Kim and her staff for getting them there and for these freshmen for really being good coming in and growing throughout the course of the year.

Q. This team seems to go on -- kind of start the game a little slow sometimes, including this game, but it seems like they just have a will to win. What's the motivation going into the fourth quarter? What's kind of the secret to the team pulling off wins time and time again throughout the entire season?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the fourth quarter burst is a couple different things. A, I think we have elite athletes that's are in good shape, and I shout out our strength and conditioning Coach Kelly Dormandy, who I think there's nobody better. I also think our players are insanely competitive and they do have a will to win.

With JuJu and Kiki in particular, it's not just their talent, they just have a fierce, kind of competitive will about them and go ahead and make plays that you can't really script.

I think the team -- I would say many people are like that on our team -- Ken and Rayah and really our team -- and the confidence we've grown to know that with that burst of intensity and competitiveness, we still now have all the players that we need to make plays. You can't sell out on one player on our team or take away one thing.

I think the will to win has been there, and now there's probably more of a connectivity and synergy amongst the group of what it takes to get stops together and to score points together and to have just sort of some energy and athleticism at the end of the game that separates us.

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THE MODERATOR: Here joining us from the University of Michigan is head coach Kim Barnes Arico, Syla Swords, and Jordan Hobbs.

Coach, if you'd go ahead and make an opening statement.

KIM BARNES ARICO: USC is a great team. Obviously they are led by a Player of the Year candidate as well as another All-American. I thought it was a great basketball game until maybe five minutes to go in the game. It was back and forth.

I thought our team was exceptional and really defended great. Then the game just kind of got away down the stretch.

Q. This is for either Jordan or Syla. What do you guys think changed down the stretch in the fourth quarter that allowed USC to go on their run?

SYLA SWORDS: They scored 50 points in the second half, and we scored a lot of points off of transition in the first. It was a lot easier for us to get into our offense. So that and the foul calls, it messes up the rhythm of the game. It's harder for us to get into a flow and what we want to get into.

So that was a really big difference maker for sure.

Q. Syla, you didn't get to play last time against USC. What was the motivation coming into the game? Jordan, how did having Syla on the floor today change it?



SYLA SWORDS: It's the same as any game. No one thinks we're supposed to be here. No one thinks we should have won the last game. We've shown that we can play with any team in the country for 30 minutes of the game.

But the game isn't a 30-minute game, it's a 40-minute game, and that's where we have to step up.

Yeah, I had a good game today, but not good enough. We all have areas that we need to improve on to really get that next step and start winning these top ranked games.

JORDAN HOBBS: I think having Syla gives us a lot of confidence. She's just someone who's super steady on the court and a very mature player for being a freshman especially. It was nice going into that game knowing that they hadn't faced her before and knowing that they didn't know what she could really bring to the table from an on-the-court perspective.

Definitely gave us more confidence, and she showed up today.

Q. It seems like later in the game USC mainly ran the offense to their post and sort of went away from JuJu. Is that something you guys took note of defensively, and how did you attempt to approach that?

JORDAN HOBBS: We definitely took note of it. I mean, Kiki was going off in the second, and she had 8 in the first, I think, first half, and they just kept going back to her. We were talking about it in our huddles. She was also making some good passes out, and they hit some clutch 3s as well.

Should have done a better job pushing her out early and potentially showing help earlier too.

Q. Obviously not the final result you guys wanted, but you guys were neck and neck with one of the top teams in the country for over 30 minutes. What are some positive takeaways from today's game?

SYLA SWORDS: It gives us a lot of confidence heading



into the tournament. March is when it really matters. Like I said, we can play with anybody. It's the growth that we have to show and the maturity we have to show in putting four quarters together of offense and defense, not losing our minds off of turnovers or when they go on their runs.

But it gives us confidence. No one expected us to be here, and we're here. So we're going to surprise a lot more people next tournament.

Q. Jordan had a great tournament. I feel like her impact isn't talked about as much as Syla and Olivia this season. Syla, can you talk about the impact Jordan has had game in and game out of this tournament and kind of all season long?

SYLA SWORDS: Aside from the stuff that shows up in the box score, she's been asked to guard the top five in the country, the top bigs in the country, asked to rebound and asked to play the point guard on top of that.

Aside from all that, the stuff that didn't show up is her leadership and her passion from the game. She demands so much from us as freshmen and from everyone on the court, even Coach sometimes. She really just wants Michigan to win and is a true Michigan women's basketball player.

I think that's something that's been great for us, the five freshmen, to come in and see the culture that she's established, the culture she's learned from people coming ahead of her. So Jordan is just a great leader for our team.

Q. Coach Gottlieb really sang her praises for what you guys did today and for what you've done for your group as a whole this season. What impresses you the most about the progression of this group from day one in that close game from South Carolina until now?

KIM BARNES ARICO: I think coming into the year a lot of people counted us out. We didn't return a ton of players. Our freshmen were unknown.

So I think their growth -- we started three freshmen all season long, probably one of the youngest teams in the country, with our returner Jordan Hobbs the only player that played over 10 minutes a game last year.

So to be on this stage and in this game and to do what we did in this tournament and to be five minutes away from beating a top team in the country, I think, is impressive.

Coach Frese told me yesterday she hasn't played against a team that plays this hard all season. So I think there's a lot of really, really positive things. Syla spoke about Jordan a

little bit and just we always say at Michigan those who stay will be champions.

Jordan didn't play as a freshman, as a sophomore, and maybe a little bit as a junior, and here she is leading us on this big stage and stayed through a time in college athletics when the landscape has changed so drastically and really has taken some of these young kids under her wing. I can't speak enough about Jordan and Greta.

We've kind of we've gone small this year. We played South Carolina. We played Oklahoma. We want to go down the line of strength of schedule and who we played -- UCLA -- and we're matching Greta Kampschroeder and Jordan Hobbs up with the best 5s in the country, and they're holding their own.

I don't want to say a lot of people didn't give us a lot of credit or don't really have us as a top team, and I bet, if you asked anybody in the Big Ten if they'd want to play Michigan, they would say heck no.

And the greatest thing about us is that tomorrow these kids won't even want a day off. They'll be like, Coach, when are we getting back in the gym? They want to get better for the NCAA Tournament. So when you have a group that's that driven and that passionate about it, it makes it pretty special.

Q. What do you think changed for you guys in that fourth quarter that allowed them to go on their run?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Can I ask you what do you think changed? Because I'm not allowed to say too many things.

(Laughter).

I got you red, though. This is the first time all year. You don't know what to say to that.

Q. Having Syla on the court this time against USC, how did she change the game? What new look did she give your offense and your defense as a whole?

KIM BARNES ARICO: She's arguably one of the best players, and we're talking about freshmen, but I have two freshmen on our team that are arguably two of the best players in the country. I think, when you watch them play -- and whether that's WNBA coaches that are watching this tournament that are sitting courtside that are reaching out to me and saying, oh, my goodness, they're even better in person than I've seen on film.

When you have two players like that, that are the hardest

workers, that are driven, that are passionate, you have something special. Sylva, you hear her up here. She's like a coach like sitting with 30 years experience sitting up here like talking to you guys.

She's played at the highest level. She's an Olympian. She's matched up with grown women. She knows what it takes to be successful.

I thought tonight the number one thing about both her and Liv is they're winners. Sylva's high school team went to the National Championship. Olivia's high school team won numerous state championships in basketball and soccer. They know how to win at the highest level. That is a great skill, and that is what they both have, and it's a difference maker for us.

When she went into the game today, I was like this is your time to shine. This is what you do. This is the moment that you've prepared your whole life for. They just went out there and battled. They all did. She's just built different.

Q. What was the message to the team after the game? And where is their head at heading into the NCAA Tournament?

KIM BARNES ARICO: I think obviously in the moments after the game we're super disappointed because we felt like we were so close. Their mood, I'm going to give them tonight. They're going to need to spend some time with their families. They're going to need to regroup, and they're going to want to get back.

You heard them here. There are things -- and to get back to your original question, I think their defense bothered us a little bit. We never really got into the flow. We were kind of taken out of what we've been able to do.

I know we talk a lot about Sylva and Liv, but Mila is a pretty darn good point guard, and they really were up on her, pestering her. That was their game plan. They don't play like that against everybody. They had to play like that against us. They couldn't let us get into rhythm like we did yesterday.

So I think that's why Samuels came in, and she doesn't play that many minutes. She was super, super, super disruptive.

I also think there were a lot of things that took the wind out of our sails. The backcourt violation when we banged the 3. Just feeling like we were going super aggressive and maybe not having a foul.

Or Sylva -- Sylva and 50-50 balls, I mean, we played South

Carolina. She never gets called for a foul on that. It's a 50-50 tie-up. She's done that all season long. When that happens again and again and again, I think they're getting deflated.

Then we weren't scoring as quickly as we were able to score in the pass, and that's deflating.

But what I said to Mila at the end of the game, she's a young kid. She's never been in this environment before. The greatest teacher is experience, and she has to go through it to learn from it. So it sucks and they're disappointed, but we'll be back tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned Mila, the past few games just her passing has been on another level. The assist numbers game in and game out and her vision has been great for this team. Can you speak to what she's elevated in the last two games?

KIM BARNES ARICO: Yesterday she was super frustrated because she got in foul trouble. She had eight assists and she was in foul trouble the whole game. She played 20 minutes and had eight assists. She was probably on pace to set a record.

She's figuring it out. This is a big stage. She's our point guard and has been our point guard all season long against this schedule that we played on a big, big stage, and there's a lot on her shoulders, and she's doing a heck of a job. She's getting better every day. Her assist-to-turnovers the last four games have been ridiculous. The numbers are really, really high.

Now today wasn't as great, but she faced another level of defense. USC is really great because of the offensive production of JuJu and Kiki, but really, they're really good on the defensive end. Tonight we saw that.

Q. You've talked a lot about the intangibles that Jordan brings, but her production on the offensive end and just her defense have also seemed to take off recently. Just what have you seen from her producing recently?

KIM BARNES ARICO: She's a great basketball player. She's a really great basketball player. She pours every single thing that she has into helping Michigan be successful. She loves Michigan. She loves this university. She wants us to win, and she does -- she works extremely hard at it.

But she knows that the clock is ticking, and that's why some of these seniors, I'm just like it's not over. Take a deep breath. But they know that it's coming to an end, and

she's just pouring everything she has into it. She's doing a great job for us.

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