

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

JuJu Watkins

Talia von Oelhoffen

Postgame Press Conference

UCLA - 72, USC - 67

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to welcome USC to the press conference. Coach Lindsay Gottlieb, JuJu Watkins, and Talia van Oelhoffen.

At this time, we'll ask Coach to make an opening statement.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First off, I wanted to congratulate UCLA. This was a really great atmosphere. I thought it was a tough basketball game, and I thought whoever won this game should probably be the overall No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament. They got a win and wish them well.

We've done a lot of celebrating this year, so when it's not our turn and someone else has the confetti and what have you, we're always going to do it the right way and take our pain and our disappointment and channel that into getting better.

I thought our players left it all out there on the floor. I thought we fought. I thought we were tough. I thought we had one bad half of basketball in the second half. We missed shots. Then when we tried to attack and get to the rim, we didn't get to the free-throw line.

It was their half of basketball. The two losses that we've had prior to this, I thought our team responded and really bounced forward, and that's what we'll do heading into the NCAA Tournament. My guess is this is going to make us even better, and that half of basketball will be out of us. We'll look forward that way.

So proud of our group, but we're not done.



Q. For either one of the players, lots of runs in this ballgame. You guys had a 12-0 run there in the first quarter. Finished out the second quarter on a 9-0 run with Howell knocking down the three-pointer. Going in at half with momentum on your side. Then, boy, just a tough second half. Can you put it in words?

JUJU WATKINS: We're always positive. I think that last 3 by Avery gave us a lot of momentum going into the third. We came out with the right energy. I just don't think our shots were falling, and we tried to get it back, but we couldn't.

Q. For both players, everybody had the same challenge obviously, but can you kind of describe the challenge of playing three games in three days and the fatigue associated with that and how you fight through that.

TALIA VAN OELHOFFEN: I think obviously both teams had to play three games in three days. I don't know if that was necessarily a factor in that second half, but obviously didn't hit shots that we usually hit. It felt like every time we missed an open look, they came down and capitalized on it.

I think we just need to do better navigating on the shooting struggles and figure out how to get to the rim and get to the line.

Q. For either JuJu or Talia, how difficult is it to play a team three times in the same season? Especially this is twice in eight days. While you guys were very careful not to say that you wanted to see this game, they were very much wanting to play you guys again. How much more difficult does that make it?

JUJU WATKINS: I think it's always hard. Of course three times, even two times, just knowing that we've already done our scout, they've done our scout. So figuring out ways to tweak it.

But we were excited to play them as well. It's not like we shy away from competition. We're always grateful to play them because they push us and we push them. We were



very welcoming to this game. Our coach has prepared us. We struggled in the second half.

Q. Lindsay, similar question. How tough is it to play any team three times in a row, especially when you just did it eight days ago?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, it just gives it a different feel. There's so much familiarity on both sides. I do think the three games in three days is very unique. You don't do it in an NCAA Tournament. You don't do it any other time in the regular season.

We had a closer game yesterday than they did. We went 2 for 15 in the second half from three, and they were 6 for 9 from the first half from three, so they were more efficient, but still not as good. 2 for, whatever, 6 in the second half. Then you add that to it, and it just makes for a different feel for the whole thing.

It was a heavyweight fight, and I think both teams brought the intensity level for sure.

Q. There was an 11-minute period where the team missed 15 straight shots going into the fourth quarter, late in the fourth quarter. What do you tell the team to kind of get them out of that? If there's anything you can say to try to get them out of that funk.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I thought that the open 3s that we get off of how they're guarding JuJu or how they're guarding Kiki, locked and loaded, shoot it, giving them confidence. But I also told them, hey, let's be aggressive. They're in foul trouble. Let's get to the rim. And we ended up shooting 13 total free throws. So I thought they tried to do what I said, which was get to the rim, and didn't get to the line.

But you've got to make open shots and continue to give them confidence. We know we're a really good fourth quarter team typically. Of course it was deflating to miss all those shots and get a little bit ragged in the third quarter, but I thought we tried to put the foot on the gas in the fourth and just couldn't get to where we wanted to get to, either to the rim or to the free-throw line or just get to our shots and knock them down. It happens sometimes.

Q. I thought you struggled a little bit against Indiana. I thought you struggled a little bit against Michigan and then coming into UCLA. Where do you refocus now headed into the tournament?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think Indiana and Michigan are really good teams. We came into Indiana and won without our starting center. Both teams pose problems because

they're good. Those are NCAA Tournament teams, second round games for us, maybe third -- Sweet 16 type games. So I thought it pushed us.

Like everybody else, we'll continue to use this weekend to get better. We don't want to shy away from a fight in the competition, but obviously we want to be as sharp as possible going into the NCAA Tournament.

Q. You guys had 19 turnovers this game, seemed to really struggle with them against ranked teams. In the game how do you stop the bleeding? How do you want to focus on making that a priority moving forward into the tournament?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We always want to be aggressive and play fast but not turn it over. Their pressure had something to do with it. Both teams were playing intense defense. We turned them over 24 times; they turned us over 19 times. But obviously they scored a little more off of it.

We got 21 offensive rebounds. We turned them over 24 times. Our effort was there. We weren't that clean. I don't know, when you play a team a third time, it's ever going to look completely clean, but we never want to turn it over because we think our offense is pretty potent.

We held them to the mid-60s before we had to foul. That should be enough to beat them. We have to take care of the ball, knock down shots, and get to the free-throw line when we're attacking like that, and we'll be better on the offensive end.

Q. The Big Ten does not have a lot of National Championships in women's basketball. With you and UCLA, you're very promising Final Four contenders. How has this conference prepared you for a deep run like that that maybe other conferences don't?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: With the depth of talent in the league, and I think there will be 12 or 13 NCAA Tournament teams, we've faced NCAA Tournament caliber teams night in and night out, all of whom have different styles. And obviously we challenged ourselves in the nonconference with UConn and Ole Miss and Notre Dame to get ready.

It's still one game at a time, but we definitely feel like our preparation is there based on the competition we faced, both in the Big Ten and in our nonconference.

Q. Talking about runs in the ballgame, the 12-0 run, the 9-0 run, the run in the second quarter that got you up by 10. Then at the end of the game, who's involved

in it but JuJu? She's involved in all the three, four runs in there. Just your thoughts on how she's the leader of this team.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: The kid is so good and just keeps getting better. I thought she should have been at the free-throw line a little bit more tonight, but I think she commands a presence and an attention from another top, top team that says we've got to do all kinds of different things. They played some box and one. They switched defenders on her.

Yet she can still get to her scoring and we get open looks for everybody else. We weren't our most efficient tonight at any realm of it, but her impact on winning and her heart and her competitive spirit is something else. We've become a real team.

I think my favorite play of the game was probably that one at the end of the half because she raced it down the floor, hit Ken on a dime, and Ken hit Avery on a dime. That's a sophomore and two freshmen. I think they've galvanized around one another. Obviously her excellence is on display and it's got its handprints over everything we've done and will continue to do.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Londynn Jones

Postgame Press Conference

UCLA - 72, USC - 67

THE MODERATOR: We are going to welcome the Big Ten Tournament champions UCLA Bruins to the press conference. Coach Cori Close, Lauren Betts, Londynn Jones, and Kiki Rice.

Coach, if you would make an opening statement.

CORI CLOSE: Thankful. Thankful and humbled to watch them persevere, to grow, to find ways to win, to be committed to selflessness. Just so grateful.

I just was praying this morning. I was like I just want to see them be the best version of themselves for each other, and that's what I got to see today is them just find a way, in unpredictable ways -- I just told them in the locker room, if you had told me we were going to turn the ball over 24 times and get outrebounded by 11 and still win, I would have told you you're crazy.

This group just said we'll find a way. There was no panic. They had great poise, and they did it with defense. We had nine kills in the game, and that's a huge thing. Kills are three stops in a row, and that was the difference in the game.

I just really want to say thank you to all the people who helped us get here. My staff, incredible, selfless, hard working, mission minded, incredible. Then just all the people, just for me personally that I wouldn't be sitting in this chair without.

There was someone when I was a sophomore in high



school, Julie Plank, she was a coach at Stanford at the time. I went to camp, and everyone told me I was too short and too slow. She pulled me aside after camp and said, "You can do this," and she was here tonight, and I got to hug her and say thank you.

So just to humbly say "thank you" to the alumni, to all the people that came before us, I'm just full of gratitude.

Q. Comeback win over your rival after losing twice this season, for any of the players, take me through how you're feeling right now.

LAUREN BETTS: I'm kind of speechless right now. Not going to lie. Just speechless.

KIKI RICE: Excited and I'm proud of this group and how we fought today. It hasn't been easy. I thought we came out ready to play. Just really proud of everyone.

Q. Kiki and Londynn, what did you guys do in that third quarter? You both are playing with three and four fouls. You guys were down 13 at the beginning of the quarter. What changed for you at that point?

LONDYNN JONES: For me, it was just being smart. I know my team needed me, and I'm going to try to show up in any way I can, whether it's four fouls or one. It was important for me to just contain, keep in front, and communicate as much as I could to those around me.

KIKI RICE: I think it was just rebounding. We made a really big emphasis on rebounding, getting those 50-50 balls. Even though they ended up outrebounding us, we still found a way in the second half to turn it up and hustle and fight. I think what's we lacked the first two times we played them, and that's what we brought in the second half today when we came back and won.

Q. Lauren, you finished the game by 17 points. 13 of your points came in the second half alone. What do you think it was that helped spark you and helped you get into your flow in the game?

LAUREN BETTS: I think just taking advantage of my



matchup and honestly doing whatever the team needed me to do in that moment. I think that I just was trying my best to get deep seals and just putting myself in the best position to score. I knew that I wasn't going to get calls, but I think it was the mentality that I had going into the second half that I was going to keep being aggressive.

Kiki spoke to me in the locker room as well, just reminding me that I'm not going to get calls, but I just have to keep playing hard, and the outcome will speak for itself.

Q. Lauren, this week you've won defensive Player of the Year action you've made First Team All Conference. Today you won the Big Ten Championship and Most Outstanding Player. What do these accolades mean for your confidence going into the NCAA Tournament?

LAUREN BETTS: It's great, but to be honest, they don't mean much to me. What means most is this win that this team had. I know the amount of work that went into it, and this team means everything to me.

Yeah, it's great, but I think honestly the confidence that this team has winning that game going into March Madness is a lot.

Q. Lauren, I'm wondering if you could just speak to the ability of this team to put a stamp on, in this first year of the Big Ten, the other teams knew the caliber of team you guys were. Obviously that makes you a target. What do you think sort of message that sends, or what kind of accomplishment is that?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, this is a really talented team. We knew we were coming into an amazing conference, and we never doubted that. We put in a lot of work all preseason, and we had the confidence that we were going to win this tournament and no one was going to deny us from that.

I think that just the work that was done in the dark just showed today. Like I said, these are amazing teams, but I think we were just the better team today, and there was a lot of work that went into it.

Q. Getting this win, how does it kind of fuel your mindset going into the NCAA Tournament? Does it put you in a good place mentally, do you think? For anybody that wants to answer?

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, I think it puts us in a great place. We're going to honestly take our time. We still have a lot of work to do. So just going back and preparing for what's to come next and leaning on each other.

Yes, this does build confidence, so we know what we can do. We always believed what we can do, but it was just a matter of showing it. We did that tonight with a lot of heart, and we gave it all we had out there for 40 minutes, and that's the most important thing. It was going to be super important to continue that.

Q. Lauren, you anchored the defense with four blocks that game. Coach was talking about how important the defense was, especially in the second half. Could you just kind of lead us through what was working out there and what your defensive mentality was out there.

LAUREN BETTS: I think it was just making myself a little bit uncomfortable. Obviously playing on the perimeter is something that a lot of 6'7" posts don't like to do, but I think that's what the team needed from me in that moment. When JuJu was coming off the screens, just pushing myself to get up higher and get her in an uncomfortable situation.

Honestly I think the team did a good job finding next players, denying next passes. It was really a team effort. Yes, the blocks were there, but it was just every single person coming in with that mindset, like we are going to get this stop.

Q. Coach, you kind of alluded to it, but this feels like kind of a long time coming for you. You talked about being grateful and humbled and all that, but just do you feel overwhelmed by the emotion of this when you went up on that ladder and snipped the net down? What does it feel like?

CORI CLOSE: I think there's definitely a sense of -- it's really meaningful to watch their faces and just the pure joy of conquering hard things.

But honestly, the number one thing that I have tried to stay committed to is this is not about me. This is about serving young people through basketball and helping them become who they want to become and impact who they want to impact. It's just really not about me.

I'm thrilled that they got rewarded for their hard work. There's so many things definitely going through my head, but what it does for me is not one of them.

Q. What I want to ask you about is Gardiner. Four straight times down the floor, SC led by six points, four straight times down the floor she got the rebound. Tell me how important she is. If I had a game ball, I'd give it to her.

CORI CLOSE: I think there's a lot of game balls to go

around, so many selfless things. What I loved so much about that, is people talked about her three in the first half but our challenge to her was we need you to defend and rebound better. That is going to put you in a situation to give you what we know is such an elite skill of hers and what she can do for us on the offensive end.

To watch her be the one that turned the tide with the rebounding, I just was so proud of her.

Then we were trying to go offense-defense with her, and even putting her on defense, and I was thinking, man, who would have thought we'd be thinking like that? But she earned that, and I'm really proud of her.

Q. You said yesterday that one of the most disappointing things about last week is that you lost the toughness battle. When they went up by 13, what were you thinking, and what was it like to watch your players dig themselves out of that?

CORI CLOSE: Well, we lost it the first two quarters, let's be honest. It's pretty evident. Every ball on the ground, they got to first. Every rebound got taken out of our hands. We didn't win the toughness battle in those first two quarters.

I really wondered what their eyes were going to look like when I went into the locker room at halftime, and they were poised and determined. They knew they had not played their best, and they didn't do the things we needed to do, but they still believed they could turn it.

I just said, look, here's where it lies. You know, if we don't win the toughness battle and the possessions battle and we don't get stops, we're not -- how bad do you want to win? What does this mean to you? They're like, we got you, Coach. We're going to get this thing done.

So to hold them to 9 points in the third and 13 in the fourth, I guess I can believe them.

Q. The strength and depth of this league is unquestioned, we've seen that the last five days.

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely.

Q. Rightly or wrongly, a league is often judged a lot by March, and it's been a long time for the Big Ten. How important is it that someone from this league, particularly as strong as it is now, win a National Championship?

CORI CLOSE: I think it helps everybody, right? If we want to be a league that is about elite and championships and

setting the standard of excellence, that's going to push -- that's going to be the rising tide that lifts all boats, right?

It's something we all need to shoot for. I also think that we need to -- one of the things I'm really proud of in being a part of this league is that we are lifting each other up. We are making each other better. It doesn't make us any less competitive on game night.

But I think we want to do something special as a conference, and I think that when that happens -- I don't think it's a matter of if, it's a matter of when that happens -- I think that there will be a collective celebration because we want to hold ourselves to championship standards.

Q. Coach Gottlieb was saying earlier that she thought the winner of this game should be the No. 1 overall seed. I wonder if you had any thoughts on that, and would that be meaningful?

CORI CLOSE: I would agree with her. I think that both teams were -- obviously USC is an excellent team, and they are -- they've handed it to us twice, but the fact that they are our only two losses, we were No. 1 in the country for, I think, 13 weeks. They have really, I think, shown the steadiness and the quality of their wins and how they have grown and changed. They're an excellent team. They are a championship caliber team.

I remember the very first time we played at their place, Lindsay said, I'm really hoping we're going to get to do this four times. I think that it would mean a lot for us both to be No. 1 seeds. I think you have to prove yourself, right? Your play has to back that up, and I hope we do get a chance to do it in Tampa on a fourth time.

Q. Numbers of the night, field-goal percentage, 3-point shooting, free-throw percentage, all over 50 percent. As physical a game this was, just your thoughts on how your girls stayed together and succeeded and shot as well as they did.

CORI CLOSE: It's been really physical every time we've played. It's going to be more physical in March. That's just the way the game shifts a little bit. So you've got to be ready to fight through that.

I think Kiki, you heard from Lauren, Kiki reminding her of that. You're going to get fouls, it doesn't matter. Find a way. I think that's really what we have to do is commit to being the more physical team. We always say the tougher, more together team wins. I do think we stayed really together tonight through the adversity, through all the different ups and downs.

You're going to have to do that to make a late run in March.

Q. Given how you won this game, winning the toughness, beating your rival, all those things you talked about yesterday, how important is it to have this in the last game to prepare you for the next week in March?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's interesting, as good as we've been, we're not as confident as you would think. I think they earned some more confidence tonight. I think you want your team hungry and edgy going into the NCAA Tournament, but also really confident. I think our team earned some confidence tonight, and I think that's going to go a long way.

Q. I think you only fouled JuJu two free-throws in the second half after eight in the first. How big of a difference did that make?

CORI CLOSE: Huge.

Q. She wasn't able to get to the line on a day her shot wasn't falling to help the rally.

CORI CLOSE: What Lauren said is right, it's absolutely a team effort. I thought her rotation -- but not just hers. I thought Timea Gardiner had some great rotations in helping. I thought she really used her basketball IQ tonight.

The other part about that usually when you really commit to getting it out of JuJu's hands and defend her without fouling, she finds Kiki Iriafen. I thought our defense on her may have been the most important thing. Let's be honest, JuJu still got 29.

But when you look at the games in which they have had to make surges, even last night against Michigan, Kiki is such a huge part of them. And I thought our rotations to make things hard for her and then to keep her off the boards in the fourth quarter, that was pivotal.

This league doesn't do what it does without you guys bringing exposure and telling the stories. Thank you very much, and thanks to my mom back there too.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports