

# Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 6, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

## UCLA Bruins

## Coach Cori Close

## Lauren Betts

## Gianna Kneepkens

### Postgame Press Conference



UCLA 78, Washington 60

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with the advancing coach from UCLA, Cori Close, and student athletes Lauren Betts and Gianna Kneepkens. Coach, if you will make an opening statement.

CORI CLOSE: Let me check my heart rate after the hike up here. First of all, Washington played a great game. They did such a good job in their adjustments from the time they played us a couple of weeks ago to now. Just really credit them for the way that they played and just the position they put us in.

They were the more aggressive team. They played harder than us in the first quarter and put us on our heels. You know, just want to give them credit for the game that they played.

You know, it wasn't our best, so we just have to take responsibility for what led to how we came out in that game and make sure it doesn't happen again. It's okay to make mistakes sometimes, but it's never okay to not be the tougher, more together, more aggressive team from the jump. We got to learn that lesson right away.

But all of my focus now moving forward is how do we get us to be the tougher, more together, more aggressive team against either Minnesota or Ohio State.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. For Lauren, this was your first game since being named Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year. What did that mean to you? Obviously you had a great performance today. What went into today's**

**performance?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, first off, super grateful. I always credit UCLA, my coaches, my teammates, for putting me in this position. I wouldn't be the player I am without them. They've helped me so much with my confidence and growth in these past three years, so I'm just forever grateful for everybody here.

Yeah, I don't know. Today I think I went in with a certain confidence. I knew I wanted to win this game, and I was going to do whatever the team needed. Today they were playing me with single coverage for most of the game, so that worked in my benefit, and I just took advantage of it and was aggressive for the entire game.

**Q. You are already going to have a target being the No. 1 seed, being undefeated. Everyone is going to bring you their best. Now adding in tournament and win-and-go-home kind of environment, what did you see differently from Washington that you didn't see a few weeks ago?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I mean, yeah, Washington is a great team, and I think the stakes get a little bit higher just because it is one and done, so we just have to make sure that every game -- it doesn't matter that we are the 1 seed, because everyone's record is 0-0.

So just going in with that 1-0 mentality and making sure we are consistent and doing the things we know what to do.

**Q. Lauren, it looked like there was a moment -- there was a questionable traveling call on Gianna. Coach was getting upset, and it looked like maybe you kept her from being a technical foul there or saying something. You were about to check back into the game. Did you say something to Coach to keep her from getting a technical?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I did. I completely forgot about that. Just got to calm her down a little bit. She's okay. She usually doesn't get like that, but she has her little moments.



CORI CLOSE: She's been having my back a lot recently.

LAUREN BETTS: That's true.

CORI CLOSE: I have to give her credit for that, so I know Lauren has got me.

**Q. For both players, you guys have taken this program to places it hasn't seen before, and I know you still have a lot of things you still want to do, but when you reflect on it, what's it mean to you to be part of something like that?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, it's really special. You know, ever since I got here my sophomore year, I knew the goal was to get as far as we could go and win games in March. To see the growth of this team and these players and who we've gotten in the three years that I've been here has been really cool.

I think, you know, the goal is always the same, and we're going to continue to just be the best version of ourselves every single day. Yeah, to be at this program and just see how we've developed has been amazing, and I'm just really, really grateful to be here.

**Q. Angela had six points and two steals and Gabriela had five points and one steal. Can you two speak to how they impacted this game and just the notion that they are so spirited playing on that same team as you ladies?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, their impact is just like -- every game we count on Ang and Gabs to have big games for us. They play so hard. The thing is, they can put the ball in the bucket too. Maybe not today as much as they usually do, but they can get buckets, they can pass the ball, they dive on the floor, they get rebounds.

So they're instrumental to our team. We all love playing with them.

**Q. Lauren, for you, you're the Player of the Year, Defensive Player of the Year for the Big Ten. Can you describe your mentality to dominate on both sides of the court and how that helps you?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I would like to hear that.

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, I think I kind of talked about it yesterday with Gabs. My mentality going into every single game is, like, defensive -- it's on the defensive end. I prioritize that the most. How can I execute the scout? How can I take away the best players? How can I rebound? That's what comes first to me.

Then points will come. But yeah, I don't know. I just think I've always prided myself on defense, and I take it very seriously. I know it's going to help our team win games, at the end of the day.

Yeah, I don't know. I just think it's having that selfless attitude that, yes, I'm going to end up getting the ball at some point, but if I can help on the defensive end, that's how we're going to get further in March, so...

**Q. For Gianna, what's it been like playing? This is your first year playing with Lauren. What's it been -- is there anything that surprised you? You knew who she was pretty much as a player, but being her teammate, have you learned anything? Has there been anything that's kind of revealed itself to you?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I mean, I came in here knowing she was one of the best players in the country, and that's a lot of the reason why I came, is playing with the best players in the country.

So I think the coolest thing I've seen from Lauren is just the kind of teammate she is. She demands the best from everybody, and every team needs that. So she is an incredible basketball player, but having her leadership has been huge for us.

It's been a lot of fun playing with her, so I am trying to enjoy every moment we have in March.

LAUREN BETTS: Aw, thanks.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Coach, you had a very well-timed timeout in the second quarter. I think it was 15-0 run after that. What did you say to the team? What was kind of -- we all saw what was happening at that point, but what did you say to kind of turn things around?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, you know, I'm always hesitant to say that it was anything I said because that means I'm responsible for how we came out too, right?

I think with a veteran team like this, they already knew they were not playing their best, so sometimes I think with the first timeout I really lit into them. That one it was just, like, I just said, we got to take a deep breath right now and what did we commit to; make them say back to me, what's the scouting report? What do we got to take away? What are they -- and just bring them back to the next right step.

At that point I just didn't think they needed me to light them up again, but I think it's bringing their thinking to what they already know. I think sometimes when you know you screwed up, sometimes it can, you know, get in sort of a negative loop in your head, so I just wanted to get them out of that negative loop and into what does it look like when we're executing our scout? What does it look like when we take away the things we need to take away? Then trying to give them a focus on offense.

But, you know, we all have to. Coaches and players have to take responsibility that here we are in March, and we came out with less than our best focus and effort. That's something we got to take care of right away.

As I said, I don't really believe in survive and advance if you're going to try to go win this thing. It has to be thrive and advance, and it has to be we're playing our best basketball, we attack, we know who we are. It's a mindset.

You know, we got to get that back really, really quick.

**Q. A little bit on that same line, you and a lot of your players understand what a long ride through March feels like. When you are back to March again, does that put in even another level of hunger, another level of recognition, of understanding of what this is all about, and how does that impact you now at this point?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it really should, right? I do think I feel in a much better position to, even as a leader, to lead through a long run in March. I think that they understand what it's like as a player to have the target on their back and what that's going to look like.

That being said, nothing is promised. The only way you get to have a long run in March is to stay very present, focused, and to have a 1-0 mentality. I told them after the game, a 1-0 mentality means right now focus on your recovery, being careful about what you let in your mindset and what kind of influence and attention you give away.

I think it's very mental at this point, and you got to protect that. Coach Tasha does an amazing job with our mind gym and our mental conditioning program. She talks about every day almost we draw one circle and then we draw another one on the outside. We write on the outside the things that we're just not going to let in our attention or our circle and the things out of our control.

On the inside it's things that we're going to protect, that we're going to focus on. You better live that. That can't be just a little activity that we do. That's got to be real if you expect to earn another day, another game, another

practice.

I think that's the 1-0 mentality is really, really important if you want to do -- you know, have a long run in March.

I do think we're more equipped, but you can't carryover anything. You got to do it one day at a time.

**Q. Cori, I thought with your slow start, I thought Kiki Rice played above everybody else in the entire game. Talk a little bit about Kiki. Then there's a thing called depth, but then there's a thing called quality depth. Talk about that.**

CORI CLOSE: Well, I'll do it backwards. I mean, our quality depth has been really important for us all year long, you know, and I think the media time-outs are so long. If it wasn't three games in three days, I wouldn't be worried about any part of that, but I think that we really do have a lot of faith in our depth. They've been tested. They've been in pressurized moments, and so we're able to use that to our benefit.

But when your guard play -- so Kiki had six assists and one turnover and Charlis Leger-Walker had five assists and one turnover. Guard play in March is everything, and to have two guards, not just one, that can run a team that way, is really huge.

Our late clock efficiency, because we have Kiki Rice on our team and we could really put her in the middle of the floor and get her downhill, I just think her efficiency puts so much pressure on the defense, especially with late clock.

But you mentioned our depth at all fits, because there were lots of times in previous years where Kiki could get downhill, but we didn't have the court spacing because we didn't have the quality of shooting that allowed those driving lanes to take place.

So everybody has a piece in how good Kiki is playing. The thing I love about Kiki is she understands that the most. She understands that it's about team.

But Kiki has been playing the best basketball of her career. I think she has put in the work. She knows what she's earned, and she's just -- she's sort of "that girl" for us.

**Q. It goes without saying, but how instrumental was Lauren again today in the post feeds and just the way she can dominate?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think second half was very different though. The first half really challenged her. Credit to Washington. When they were getting around and we

weren't getting contact on those post-ups and having those players get behind us, we were forced to throw lobs and then they were running underneath it. Just really challenged her.

Actually at halftime I had Timea Gardiner come up and I demonstrated, like, how she needed to seal. Like go after people. Do not call for the ball until you have contact, until you have somebody behind you, because we're not giving it to you unless you do that.

I just think Lauren really stepped up in that way. If they're going to go play us one-on-one in the post, I thought we needed to take advantage of that a little bit more with Angela, the two, but Lauren really stepped up huge for us and got those deep post touches.

At the first couple of possessions of the game she was reverse-pivoting and facing up and shooting the 8-foot jumper. I'm, like, you're feeding into exactly what they want you to do. I just thought every single touch she got in the second half was to the rim and was with aggression.

We're best when we can play through that, play through the paint, and Lauren was huge tonight on both sides of the ball. There's not another center in the country that can -- we can switch and stay on those shooters the way that we did and the way she does. I give her so much credit on how she stepped up to be really make plays on both sides of the ball.

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