

# Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 8, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

**UCLA Bruins**

**Cori Close**

**Lauren Betts**

**Kiki Rice**

Postgame Press Conference



UCLA 96, Iowa 45

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Big Ten champions UCLA to our press conference. Coach Cori Close, the Big Ten Coach of the Year and student-athlete Lauren Betts, the Big Ten Player of the Year, and Kiki Rice, the Most Outstanding Player of this year's Big Ten Tournament.

CORI CLOSE: It's sort of -- first of all, this means a lot because the Big Ten prepared us, and these great coaches -- Jan Jansen is one of my favorites. She, I think, does an incredible job. What she's done there in her first two years is remarkable.

For us to come out the way we did, it means a lot because we're doing it against really good teams. So we're really grateful to be a part of the Big Ten, and we have lots of respect for everybody in this conference.

I expected this, so I am joyful and full of gratitude, humbly wanting to thank the people in this program and this university to support us to pursue this level of excellence.

I just want to say thank you to the incredible players that really fulfilled their mission and stayed committed to the hard character qualities that we knew we needed to make this kind of run. But at the same time, we're going to enjoy it because we know we have another day coming up to earn another 1-0, and that's really what we're going to do next.

**Q. Lauren, I'm just curious what's it been like to kind of see Kiki grow these last couple of years, and what's it been like to see a performance like today where she ends up most outstanding player?**

LAUREN BETTS: I'm so proud of Ki. She observes everything and all the accomplishments and all the praise. She's worked her butt off for the past three years. She's the hardest worker I know. A lot of the work that you guys don't see, she's constantly just in the gym trying to get better.

What I love most is she's one of the most selfless people I've ever played with. She really could care less about all of the attention. She just wants to win games. She's always there for her teammates. I'm so grateful I get to be her teammate and her friend. She's amazing.

**Q. Lauren, was that the same dance routine that you did the other day?**

LAUREN BETTS: It sure was. It sure was, yeah. (Laughter).

**Q. Was that spontaneous, or did you know you were going to do that?**

LAUREN BETTS: I had no clue. Gabs looked at me and she said, they're playing our music, and we just went for it.

**Q. So it just happened the same song was playing?**

LAUREN BETTS: Oh, yeah.

**Q. How incredible, just the joy and celebration, was winning this and going back to back?**

LAUREN BETTS: I'm so proud of this group. Honestly, like Coach Cori said, I'm not really surprised because of the amount of work we've done in practice. We've been competing against ourselves all season and just constantly trying to get better every single day. When you have moments like these, you just feel really prepared for it.

Everyone came out with a certain level of confidence that I just knew we were going to win.

**Q. Lauren, I had a question for you about your sister today. She met every career high in this game, and she came in early, and she had a breakout**



**performance. Can you talk about her play today.**

LAUREN BETTS: Oh, my gosh, yeah. Coach Cori came to the bench in the fourth quarter, like this is Sienna's world, and we're just living in it because it really did feel like that.

I'm just really proud of her because I know this season it's hard being a freshman on this team with these elite players. She continues to stay confident and ask for the ball and wants to get shots.

That's the type of energy we need. When you get to moments like these when you're in the game, she went in and did her job. Her attitude has been so amazing, so I'm just so happy for her.

**Q. Kiki, I just want to ask, you've had such a great season. Like personally, where do you feel the most that you've improved so far?**

KIKI RICE: Honestly, I first give a ton of credit to my teammates. I think this year the way that we moved the ball and everyone gets touches is so important for everyone and allows me to be successful.

For me, I think the biggest thing would be defensively. I worked a ton of that in the off-season and really stepped up to the challenge of guarding the other team's best perimeter player. I think me being challenged in that way, it's been a really great area of growth, and that's probably the area that I'm most proud of.

**Q. I'm going to ask the coach this as well, but if my calculations are right, you've got 18 Quad 1 wins compared to UConn's 8. You've got 12 ranked 1 wins compared to UConn's 5. Do you think you deserve top overall seed?**

KIKI RICE: Honestly, the decision is not up to us. We're a great team. We've done all we needed to do, and the committee will make that decision, but we're not focused on that. Whenever the RAC comes out, we'll see our path, who we need to focus on for each round, but that's not what we're focused on. We're not focused on what the committee decides.

**Q. Lauren, I want to ask you, what's the one thing through this season that you've grown as a person and a player?**

LAUREN BETTS: I think my steadiness. I mean, with so much that goes on outside of my control, you have rankings, you have people who talk about my career after college, and I can't worry about any of that because my

biggest focus is situations like this, winning championships and winning games and doing whatever my team needs me to do.

With everything going on, I'm really proud of how I've just stepped into the leadership role and just stayed very consistent because it's not easy. I know I have great people around me that remind me of who I am every day, and I could not be more thankful for this program.

**Q. Obviously an amazing offensive performance, but you guys also had four players who had three steals each. How is it a collective defensive effort today from you guys?**

KIKI RICE: Every single night we take pride in our defense, and I think that's what really ignited us today. We obviously knocked down shots, but I think the way we got after it defensively. When we can start like that, we can start with a lot of pressure, being the aggressors and dictating on the defensive end, it's going to help us and get us easier looks on offense.

I think that's the foundation and the backbone of our team, and we take pride in the way we defend. We have an anchor in the paint. So we always know our guards can put pressure on them and force them inside to Lauren. So proud of the group and how we defended.

**Q. Two things. First of all, same one I asked your players about the Quad 1 wins, the rank wins. Do you deserve the No. 1 overall seed?**

CORI CLOSE: I don't really care either. I think the biggest thing for us is that we've tried to really just decide to narrow our focus, and the reality is, when you focus on things out of your control, it will adversely affect the things under your control.

I think, if I put any energy towards that, I'm taking energy away from what it will actually take to get there.

I think our focus needs to be on the how. How do we play our best basketball in March? How do we learn from the previous year? How do we continue to fight to get one possession better every single day?

If I give energy to that, I'm not giving energy to something more important.

**Q. Following up on that with the how, if what I read was correct, you said, "I actually don't think we're there yet," in the post-game interview. How can you play better than today, 51-point win over a really good team, right?**

CORI CLOSE: I think you know as -- I think that's what my biggest commitment to this team needed to be this year is that I needed to hold the standard, even when the score or a game might say something different or someone on the outside might say how good we are. I think my biggest responsibility as the leader of this program is to hold the standard.

We were 0-for-9 on offensive rebound misses at halftime. We've never had a rebounding thing like that. I think the danger is, when you're really efficient offensively, you just think every shot's going in. The reality is on a night that you might not be as hot as we were tonight, you have to have the habits and the discipline to be able to chase offensive rebounds, get another passion play, find easier opportunities, set better screens.

I'm obviously pleased with the performance that we had tonight. We showed some really good things. But my job is still to hold the standard.

**Q. Same thing about Kiki that I asked Lauren. What do you think has been her biggest growth point this season?**

CORI CLOSE: I think I would also agree with her that defensively has been probably the most impactful growth thing that she's had, but Kiki -- people don't realize she was out for six months. She had surgery on April 15th last year and was out for six months.

So the work she did on her mentality -- film study, with leadership, using her voice, working on her handles when she could never have a shot. I just think it's her commitment to the details. I'm not surprised that she's playing this way because of the intentional work that she puts in.

But I do think the biggest thing, I think, has been probably her passing, her facilitation, as well as I --

(No audio.)

CORI CLOSE: Hello, we're back.

Sienna has really high expectations for herself. She's an incredibly hard worker. Not only did she have an unexpected injury that made her lose a whole lot of time in November, December. When other freshmen were working through those things, she didn't have that opportunity.

Then when you're entering in with a group of six potential first round draft picks ahead of you, I think seeing her joy

today and seeing some of her freedom and how she played, that was really rewarding to watch because I know how hard she's been fighting for her perspective to stay right, to just keep focusing on the next day.

That was probably one of my greatest joys today was being able to see that level of breakthrough. As a teacher, that's what you want, right? You want to see players that sort of find gears inside of them that maybe they didn't know they had, and I think Sienna is starting to discover those.

**Q. Coach, can you speak to Charlissee? She had 23 points, 5 steals this week. Can you just speak to her contributions?**

CORI CLOSE: I pulled her aside after, and I just said, you have been our glue. I think one of the reasons -- and her and Kiki have this great relationship and really feed off of each other. I also think one of the things that Kiki's been able to do is have different kinds of scoring catches this year because of Charlissee's presence on our team.

I remember last year thinking, I can't imagine what Charlissee's impact is going to be once she plays because she's already impacting us so much and she hasn't even played a game. So I could not be more grateful for her leadership, for her basketball IQ, for her scoring mentality. She is probably our most consistent defender off the ball and on the ball.

But she's our emotional glue. Pretty much everybody looks to Char when things need to get steadied. She's so trustworthy, and she has everybody's respect, including me.

**Q. I've covered Hawkeye sports for basketball for four or five years now, and the Big Ten has some amazing basketball. We've seen that this week.**

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely.

**Q. And then there's UCLA. It is amazing to me. Is it the system? Is it talent? Is it the standard that you set? Today was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen covering women's basketball. It was amazing.**

CORI CLOSE: That says a lot considering where you come from. So I appreciate the compliment.

I think it's a combination of everything. We hope that our mission and our commitment to do things the right way, that a by-product would be competitive greatness, as Coach Wooden would call it.

But it never is -- we talk a lot about actually surrendering the outcomes, and we're just really focused on loving each other well, having intentional growth every single day, and competing possession by possession. When you add really an incredible staff around me who selflessly sacrifices for the sake of our uncommon mission, and then you get really talented players that are willing to be hard workers and selfless, it's a pretty good combination.

I also have to thank our university, and my athletic director is right here, and I got a great e-mail from our chancellor. People ask me all the time what's the most rewarding part of coaching at UCLA? It's being able to look a parent in the eye and go, you know, there's not many places you could have this level of competitive excellence, this access to this kind of education and alumni network, and then have a style of play and a commitment to NIL that allows us to compete to be the very best.

It's a privilege to be able to lead an organization like that. So it's with great humility that I say thank you for your compliment, and I'm so thankful to be surrounded by amazing people that believe in our vision.

**Q. How does going back to back kind of influence what you're feeling right now, and how would you kind of compare this one to last year?**

CORI CLOSE: It's different. I think I just had to -- when I'm talking to myself today, I'm going, hey, trust the work. They're prepared. They're selfless. They've put in the time. And just sort of trusting in our foundation.

Last year it was we were broken, brokenhearted from our loss to USC at home from our regular season. It was this incredibly rewarding thing to watch them respond in that way, but it was just such a different process. It was everybody fighting to get back to unity and to put all of their individual things to the side for the sake of the team, and that was incredible to be a part of.

Hard to describe this one. It definitely feels different, but rewarding, and I'm full of gratitude nonetheless.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations again. Thank you. We wish you the best of luck.

CORI CLOSE: Thank you. I do want to say thank you to all the people behind the scenes in the Big Ten.

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