

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 5, 2021

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Postgame Press Conference



UCLA - 58, Arizona - 49

Q. That looked like a football game out there at moments.

COACH CLOSE: I felt like I played in the football game and I wasn't even out there. So, yeah, it was extremely physical. Relentless. I'm sure as an official that was a very difficult game to call.

But I think we knew that Arizona was going to be a great defensive team. They have great length, athleticism, physicality. I thought both teams were extremely physical and really good with our defense. And it was going to be the team that could control a few more possessions, could defend without fouling. And I was just really proud of everybody on our team's ability to stay steady through that physicality.

I thought that was going to be a huge key is to not get wrapped up in the ups and downs of that, what didn't get called, what did get called and stay really steady. I thought that was the difference in the game. We were able to regroup with that and get stops and rebounds when we really needed to.

Q. You don't have the deepest roster, I don't have to tell you that. When a game is that physical, you guys look -- you're on the razor's edge a little bit. Somebody gets hurt, one or two people get hurt and you're really in a depth problem. So it's one thing to stay steady and it's another thing to just cross your finger that nobody gets hurt in that situation, isn't it?

COACH CLOSE: Not only get hurt but also get in foul trouble. Because that can quickly turn. We told them at halftime that to be ready for them to call it tighter and to be able to really move our feet and adjust to that because it was really physical the first half. It didn't end up happening exactly that way.

But to be honest with you, we don't even thinking about it anymore because we've been dealing with this all year. We can't control all of that, but we're going to find a way with whatever people we have ready to play that we've got to find a way to be the tougher, more-together team. And whatever that looks like, we're going to have to find a way to make it happen.

Q. I know it was a physical game but for the most part seemed like you kept them at arm's length. And then all of a sudden they carve into this 10-point deficit, you look up with more than a minute, they're down by two. What did you tell them? And could you also comment just on your team's poise? And also touch on Natalie. Last night she had three key steals in like the two-minute period. Tonight she came up with a big steal in that minute four. Could you touch on that final sequence?

COACH CLOSE: Well, you know, I thought Charisma was really huge in that. She hit a big shot, her only shot. I'm not sure if it was exactly at that two-point, but I knew it was getting tight.

When you're 0-fer at that point, it takes a lot of guts to step up and hit a big shot. I think Natalie has gone from defining herself as just a shooter to being a great basketball player, a multifaceted, versatile playmaker. And playmakers, you think of point guards off the bounce, but getting steals in key moments, finding a way to post up, finding a way to make a great post feed because she can be a great post feeder because they have to respect her 3-point shot.

What I'm so proud of is Natalie's never really had much confidence in her defense. And when Charisma came out of the game, we said she was going to be the one to guard McDonald.

She's the one that came up with big steals, big rebounds. And it's been really consistent. And I'm really proud of how she has redefined herself as a basketball player. And Natalie chose growth in that manner and especially her mentality has been really rewarding to watch.

Q. You seemed like you were having a nice conversation before you came to the (indiscernible). And it seemed like you were having a great conversation on Facetime before heading to the back. And could you talk about Charisma's defense even though Aari had 24 points?

COACH CLOSE: We said to Charisma at halftime, we said who cares about you versus Aari. It's winning point guard, be the winning point guard. That's what we need from you. And her defense, how hard she made McDonald work that entire game, that block at the end when they ran -- she got that drive to the right and came back. I just thought that was a big-time play. And I'm just so proud of Charisma for just saying I'm going to do whatever it takes so that, to make sure that I'm on the winning team.

And McDonald's a great player. So is Charisma. And it wasn't about stats tonight, it was about doing whatever our team needed to win the game. That's exactly what Charisma Osborne did.

Q. Wanted to ask you about another player that really has seemed to have made a huge difference for you in the last couple of games and that's Lauryn Miller. She does so much things that don't necessarily get put on the stat sheet. But I don't know, it seems like you guys might not have even won without her the last couple nights. Maybe you can tell me if she's been poised on the floor, if she's contributed?

COACH CLOSE: I just think her growth over the last few weeks has been pivotal for us. She's just been really good. And I thought really major people were Lauryn Miller, Emily Bessoir I thought gave us huge minutes, and Dominique Darius. Being in the situation she's in, we made a run when she came into that first half.

But I really do think it starts with Lauryn. She plays such a unique pivotal role. She's one of our highest basketball IQ players. We knew that we would need to use her as a facilitator because she was going to mostly have Reese or Ware on her and she was going to be able to create those catches that we need. And we just rely on her so much.

And the way she plays her role with such steadiness and versatility and commitment to the team first, that sets the tone for other people coming in. And for the Emilys doing that. And it may look different but I think she follows that same tone. And I thought they complemented each other. And we played really well with those in together for a portion of that half. But I think Lauryn really sets the tone for that.

Q. Funny you would have mention both those are the

two that was going to be my follow-up, just as far as being your freshman. Emily obviously got here before Dominique, but Dominique, seems like she has been coming along nicely, so clearly they're going to be freshmen again next year. How great is it for them to have all this, quote/unquote, practice under their belt and mature so much?

COACH CLOSE: Doesn't feel like practice, but you're absolutely correct. I'm so proud of both of them. And this was a really physical, hard, quick game. And I thought Emily played the best defense of her career. And her improvement on the defensive end over the last several weeks has been remarkable. And Dominique just keeps getting better.

She's really one of the first ones in the gym every single day. Her and Emily and Natalie shoot together after almost every practice. She is putting in the work. She spends extra film time with coaches.

And I think the future's really bright for us, because I am so excited about Emily's love of the game and Dominique's level of the game, their commitment to a high level of work ethic. And they want to compete and they want to compete at the highest levels. So really excited for what they're bringing to our team right now. They're going to need to continue to use them.

Every person has got to be counted on to do their job, whatever it is that night. And I feel pretty confident that Dominique and Emily are growing into those roles quite nicely.

Q. Obviously you guys want to celebrate, but in two days you've got Stanford coming in; they've won 13 games in a row, I believe, and two pretty comfortable wins. They're going to be well rested where you guys had two close kind of gritty games. What are you guys going to do tomorrow? Is it going to be a lot of rest and film, or are you guys going to have a full practice? What will you do postgame?

COACH CLOSE: The good news is we've had a lot of practice at this. The players are already back. They're going to cold tub and start recovery tonight. We've actually had to master this whole recovery thing pretty well. We've had to work on it a lot.

So at this point, to be honest with you, I told the team I'm really proud of you and we did these things really, well but is this what you came here to do? The answer is no. They wanted an opportunity to play on Sunday and play for a conference championship in the number one conference in the country. And what a privilege.

And I think Stanford's playing maybe the best in the entire country. They're just playing so well. They're shooting it better. They're running the floor. Their transition game has gone to another level, in my opinion. They're a great team.

But if you're going to win a Pac-12 championship, then you're going to have to play -- you're going to have to play and beat great teams.

At this point I don't worry about them celebrating. We made a commitment in the locker room that we won't speak of this game after 11:00 p.m. We're very focused on putting our energy and our time into being ready to prepare and to get our mind and hearts right.

But tomorrow's going to be much more mental, hardly any physical. Just outside of just recovery and doing those things. But we've played Stanford twice, and I think it's going to be more on the coaches and using film really wisely and having our game plan really succinct. But it will really be about recovery and mentality more than anything else.

Q. What do you think is the biggest difference between your team now -- and coming into the tournament you said you guys still had a lot of room to grow. So know that you played Stanford twice and obviously two different results, what do you think is the biggest difference with your team now and going into this final game with them?

COACH CLOSE: I sure as heck -- I think anyone watching us would say we have a lot of room to improve on the offensive end of the floor, that's for sure. But against Stanford, they're so good at playing personnel and trying to get you to play to your weaknesses and not to your strengths. That's the battle, right, when you play Stanford, is you've got to find a way that you can get the game to play to your strengths. They just prepare exceptionally.

And we've been -- we've had great battles with them. We lost to them at home right before the holiday break by 11. And then we obviously got the win up there. But I think that's always the battle, right, is how we can play to our strengths and not allow them to play to theirs.

They're such a well-coached, versatile team. They're deep. They have a great balance between inside and outside. They've got a great shot blocker in Brink. They obviously are a loaded team, but I really like our team. And they have some challenges in trying to match up versus us and play to their style.

So it's teams of contrasting styles, but it's going to be really important. I think Kiana Williams is really the key to their team. And their ability to play in transition. So we're going to have to make them have to really deal with our defense and make things really hard.

If they're able to get into a flow and their offensive rhythm, that's bad for us. If they're having to play more one-on-one and attack off the bounce and not be able to get clean rhythm-like catches, that's to our benefit.

But that's going to be the battle. Right? So I think at this point in the year it's really about matchups and how do you adjust game by game. It's going to be a completely different game plan than it was tonight. And so how do you get refocused on what does it look like on Sunday for us to be tough together and to play to our strengths.

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