

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 3, 2022

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Ilmar'I Thomas

Jaelynn Penn

Postgame Press Conference



Oregon - 63, UCLA - 60

COACH CLOSE: I told them in the locker room they showed us so much over this whole year the way to handle adversity, the way to respond to things that are out of your control, that how powerful it is when you come together and do something bigger than yourself. And they showed me a lot and our staff a lot.

But more importantly they showed themselves, what you can accomplish when you just stay committed to loving each other and growing every day. And they showed tremendous fight. Our team showed tremendous fight.

And it's hard because we really haven't had our team most of the year. And when you look at that game you can't tell me this isn't a NCAA Tournament-level team. And just look at what we're doing the last several games.

I just think -- we're just now starting -- we've probably had three practices together. I just want to keep coaching them, and I want keep committed to them. I just told them, look, they showed tremendous fight. They really battled and overcame a lot even to get to this point, let alone all the adversity that comes with playing a great team like Oregon. I love them and I'm committed to them, period.

Q. What are the things tonight that you think stood between you guys and getting a win?

COACH CLOSE: I think our ability to really help guard shooters but also keep the ball out of the post. Not even out of the post but put them in harder catches situations. And so you just look at the stat line and you look at Sabally's and Prince's stat line, that's really where they played through their post and we couldn't really stop that, especially in the second half.

And then rebounding. I thought we had to outrebound them. We were plus-two I think at the half. And it ended up minus-10. So I think that's a really key factor. And they got to the free-throw line. And those are high percentage shots.

And so the combination of rebounding, post catches and getting to the free-throw line more, I think that was the difference in the game. And our ability, we just didn't -- our offense didn't, just like their offense created the kinds of catches they wanted, we didn't quite create the kind of catches for our players and get easier baskets.

We had to work really hard on our own as opposed to our offense creating easier catches. So I think that hurt us as well.

Q. There was a possession there, it was like 24, 25 seconds left where, from our vantage point behind your bench, it looked like Sedona stepped out of bounds and got it back in. Was there an explanation that the officials gave you for that call or lack thereof there?

COACH CLOSE: Yes, the reality is that if they call an out-of-bounds, either direction, then they can go look at it. But they didn't call an out of bounds. They called a foul. So then it becomes not reviewable for that.

Q. If you don't get an NCAA at-large bid would you play in the WNIT? I know you guys are really beat up. But do you want to keep playing?

COACH CLOSE: I'll take that because it's my leadership. And I think just to put them in a tough position. We've already talked about it. Yes, we would.

I hope that the committee really looks at -- is it truly about having the top 68 teams in the tournament? And if you just keep watching all these tournaments right now and put this game up against those, you have to take a really hard look at that.

And we've had six out of nine of our players miss ten



games or more and some of our top players. It's just we're at a point now we're just getting our group together.

But it's my call as a leader of the program and we've made our decision that we would play. But I sure hope it doesn't come down to that, because this is a dream of theirs and I want to keep coaching them in that dance.

Q. This has been a rather wonky year for all of you guys. I know Coach just touched on it, but what's this adversity taught you, what lessons have you gotten out of this year?

JAELYNN PENN: First, I want to say I'm super proud of the team. Like you said, we've been through a lot of adversity, and we're playing our best basketball right now through it all. The biggest thing it's taught us we can do hard things, like we can get through that and excel.

The outcome didn't show how much we've grown as a group and showing like what we've put in to get to this point. But we can do anything. We can get through anything. And I think it made us stronger as a team as a whole.

IIMAR'I THOMAS: We grew from everything we've been through. Every time we look back on a loss or a player's injury, we know it's the next person up. We just feel there's nothing that we haven't gone through together. So I think that's something that we're just going to keep with each other forever, for sure.

Q. Jaelynn, yesterday Coach talked about you getting your mojo back after the hand injury. Could you speak about that tonight?

JAELYNN PENN: I just kept believing. Every shot before this game felt good. I kept believing it will go in. Never lost confidence in myself, and it helps because my coaches and teammates said, keep shooting; it's going to fall. That's the biggest thing, never losing self-confidence and just believing that I could be me.

Q. Can you talk about you chose with that extra year to come to UCLA, what's it's been like, this journey, and to finish out here and be a Bruin in your final year playing collegiate basketball?

IIMAR'I THOMAS: I would say just we're just grateful to be able to put these four letters on. It's such a big deal. I mean regardless of how the outcome of this year has been. Like playing here for me has been a privilege. So I'm going to keep that with me forever and I'm glad to be a Bruin.

Q. I don't want to take us too far off topic, but Charli retired today. Will you offer some thoughts about that?

COACH CLOSE: Absolutely. I was in high school and I went to Tara's first basketball camp when she was coaching at Stanford, her first year. And Charli was a player and a counselor at that camp. That's how long I've known Charli. And Charli has always been about mentoring young women, being tough.

I think a lot of times in our culture it's been looked down upon for women to be tough and gritty and competitive. She made it cool.

Her teams were always so tough, so competitive, so physical. And I think that is such an incredible legacy to leave, not only for the women that have played for her but for young girls that got to watch. I know she's always been incredibly extending and kind to me through many, many years.

We've had, I think about so many conversations we had maybe sitting on the sidelines of watching recruits and doing all those things. And she always had a desire to invest in others. And she can really be proud because she left this game better than she found it.

Q. This game probably was a Sweet 16-caliber game. Do you think they would take that into account with the other things that you were saying in terms of the players missing, but just the caliber of this game alone?

COACH CLOSE: Yeah, you know, I know the committee works so hard. And I know their job is really, really hard. And I think that it just goes back to, do you want the 68 top teams in the country in the field?

And when you watch this game, sometimes you have to close the computers and the spreadsheets and go, what did the eye test tell me? And if it comes down to that, and we're in that conversation and you look at how many times we've played without our starters throughout the whole entire year and how we have people back now, I think you have to take a good hard look at that. It comes down to that eye test.

I totally understand how hard the job is. But I think our goal really is for us to put the 68 best teams out on the floor. And I think if you're watching this, it will be hard to say that we're not one of those 68 teams.

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