

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 3, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Kiki Rice

Charisma Osborne

Postgame Press Conference

UCLA - 69, Stanford - 65

THE MODERATOR: We would like to welcome UCLA Coach, we'll start with an opening statement and then take some questions.

CORI CLOSE: I'm having a heck of a hair day now. But it's just one of those great moments where you have reference points in your program where things that you talk about become really real in your character.

We talk the tougher more together team wins. And how in the first half we were tough, but would we weren't totally together. Not because we didn't want to be, but because we just wanted to make a play to fix it. I thought we went back to, okay, we got to create easier plays for each other. We got to have our anchor be our defense. We got to get tipped balls or we got to get certain plays that are going to get us easier baskets, set better screens, be hunters not reactors.

These are all phrases that we know in our head that are going to be the keys to success for us, but we need these kind of reference points where we conquer hard things to make it go from our head to our heart, and that's what this was. Couldn't be any more proud of these two players to my right. Their mentality, their belief, their willingness to adjust and respond to adversity. This is what makes sports so special and that's what makes them transformational for them, not only in basketball, but also in their lives.

So couldn't be more proud of the building block that a win like this in the way that it happened does for our program short term as well as long term.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. Questions?



Q. Kiki, the first three quarters you ladies shot 15 attempts each quarter. That came to 31 percent. Final quarter (inaudible). What changed? What sort of clicked?

KIKI RICE: I feel like the energy and effort that we played with kind of starting off the second half I think that's really what allowed us to go on that run. I think we just got together in the huddle and we just said, okay, like, we're going to give it our all and we're going to go down fighting.

I think we were going to be okay if it didn't go our way, but we gave it all we had. That was okay. But I think we knew we really just needed to come together, play hard, and it all ended up working out for us.

Q. In the first half it seemed like you guys were really focused on defending the paint, so much so that you ended up giving up a few open shots at the elbow and in the mid-range. What kind of changed going into the second half, what adjustments did you make that allowed to be able to more effectively defend both areas on the court?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think we had to get a little closer to some of those people. Brink and Jones hadn't been shooting, the last four games hadn't been shooting that shot as well, so we were trying to take away the paint first, and especially that right block that they're so effective from.

Credit to them. They made some adjustments and hit some open jump shots from the mid-range and even on a couple of threes. So we just said we had to still make the paint the priority, but we had to recover back out a little further, knowing that each of them had tendencies when you take away that jump shot and we had to do a better job of that.

But I think we had to find a way to do both. We had to make the easy paint touches really hard and especially when they started to put it on the floor. When they got back out, we had to close out and we had to make that next jump shot harder. So I thought we made that adjustment.

But we had to do more than one thing. They're so good. They play to their identity. They're so good on the boards. That had to be a priority coming out at halftime.

Q. Charisma, can you talk about what you guys got from Emily again tonight? This tournament feels like a coming out party for her. But just in terms of offensively she did some big things for you in the first half and then her defense on Brink in the second half seemed to be a big factor.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, Emily has been playing so great lately. I'm just super proud of how she's been playing and really being herself. I think the biggest thing, not even her offense because we know she's capable of scoring, but her post defense on Cameron Brink. We all know Cameron's a really great player.

So to see her improve in her post defense from even the first time we played them to the second time to now has just been so amazing to see it. I'm just super proud of her. Obviously she didn't do it alone. There was Lina and Camryn Brown as well and all the other post players who came in.

But super proud of Emily and how she's grown and she's just playing so great and that just helps our team so much.

Q. Gina had some big shots in the fourth quarter, had the tip out rebound, which shields the game. Her leadership, it just seemed like every time there was something going on she was huddling your players. Talk about her performance and what she's meant to the team.

CORI CLOSE: Coach Tasha calls her the General and for a reason. She has, I think that's probably the number one thing that got us so excited about her becoming a Bruin is her leadership. She has this charisma about her. She has a joy about her that. But in the pressurized moments she has that balance of competitive nature and total trust.

She's been shooting the ball really well and that's allowed to us space the floor in some different ways, which allowed Kiki to get to her pull up and Charisma to get to her pull up a couple of times. Her ability to shoot the 3 last game and this game I think were really key things.

But all of those pale in comparison to her leadership. It's been really fun -- it hasn't been easy for her. She didn't really even get to practice with us last year, let alone play. So her finding her leadership style and how that was going to happen, it's just really fun to see the glimmer in her eye and how she takes control of some of those emotional moments.

Q. All season I've been speaking with you about the development of your twin towers off the bench, Lina and Christeen. As you mentioned yesterday, both of 'em gave you big minutes against Arizona. You went with both of them early today in the first quarter there and as the game went on obviously with some little things here or there they, I thought they came through in a pretty big way. Just how important were they tonight? And then what have you seen from the beginning of the season to now with their development?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that they're relentless. Even today after pregame meal Christeen is asking Coach Tasha to watch extra film. Having a growth mindset is one of the three core values of our program. That's not easy to do when you're not always seeing the rewards and when you're really hitting a lot of obstacles.

I'm so impressed with their resiliency in that. It would be very easy for them to sort of pack it in, go, well, it's not my, I'm not going to get all the rewards this year. I'll wait my turn until next year.

But the strength of mind to be able to say, no, I'm going to find a way to get better today, I'm going to work through it today, and I'm going to be available for my team whether it's one minute, whether it's 20 minutes and it doesn't matter. That's really been I think one of the keys to our growth. I knew we could grow into something eventually. But Charisma is the only one who has been in this situation on our entire team for a whole season.

So for us to sort of put the pieces to being a talented group of individuals to growing into one that has an identity and a collective identity and where everyone knows what their role is and how they can contribute, I think that takes a lot of strength of character and selflessness. And I think Christeen and Lina today are great examples of that.

But I think it's been someone different every time. I think Gabriela Jaquez has been amazing that way, Londynn Jones, Brynn Masikewich, everybody. When you start naming people you mess up and miss people.

But I think that has been one of the biggest reasons our trajectory of growth has continued even through some adverse moments.

Q. Charisma, coach talked about you being one of the leaders of this team. With every game you're passing players on all-time scoring lists. You're going to go down as one of the greatest Bruins ever. Where does this win rank in your career? You've beaten Stanford

before but to do it in the semi-finals to have the opportunity to play in a conference championship game where does this rank for you?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: That's a good question. This could be up there. This might be No. 1, I think, honestly. I think too we just had so much fun playing. It wasn't pretty the entire time, but even like if you saw us after the game, like we had so much joy and stuff like that. So I think this actually might be one of my favorite games that I've ever played in.

CORI CLOSE: I think that when you have a team that cares more about playing for the four letters across their chest and playing with and for each other, you can experience really special things. I think that has, you know, coaches love to talk about that this time of year. But what I'm really proud of as their leader is that they've really lived it. They have lived it in the tough days as well as not really fun days. So that's a lot of fun to watch.

Q. Kiki, this team has had some fourth quarter struggles, especially against Stanford. What do you think some of those regular season losses taught you guys in terms of lessons to be able to perform this way in winning time against this team?

KIKI RICE: I think we've had a ton of close fourth quarter losses to great top-10 teams. I think we know like we don't want to feel that pain again. I think in this fourth quarter we were so close like the last time against Stanford, we really felt like we could have won that game too. So this time I feel like we came out, we gave it our all, and everyone was just hunting for their shot and the best look, and we knocked it down and everyone stepped up.

Q. Could you talk about the success you had against Jones. I think you had some success against her in the last game too. She didn't score at all tonight. That takes a big part of their offense away. And then just your reaction to doing this out of playing on the first day, because that's a really hard thing to do.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it is a really hard thing to do. Jump's a great player. She was, we lost her a few times in the first game at our place and that was a huge point of emphasis. I think she was 0-6 when we went up there just 10 days ago or whatever it was.

Gina Conti and Londynn Jones had the primary most of the time to chase her around. You just have to, we have to commit to taking her away. They just did a great job of locating her, having good vision. But I also think everyone was tuned into it in transition because it's not always that way, especially when Gina's the safety. So other people

have to locate her and make sure that we limit those touches.

But it was a big point of emphasis in our game plan and I do think it really helps us double team from other places when we know we don't have to worry about that.

Q. (No microphone.)

CORI CLOSE: Oh, the first day. Yeah, I don't, I don't mean to be boring, but you got to have toughness to win in these scenarios. We got to earn another win. Yeah, it was harder. So what? So if you want to be the tougher more together team, you got to embrace that and say bring it on. And to me it's do you want to be the tougher more together team or not? This is the circumstances we had, this is what we earned, go make the most of it.

Q. You talked about them playing to their identity. But that identity has shifted even during this season a little bit. You took away Hannah Jump and she's their main three-point shooter. This isn't last year's team and just bombing away. Where you're all over on the perimeter and defending and Kiki is on the inside. Can you talk about the difference you see in them right now and what you see as their identity as they head into the NCAA tournament?

CORI CLOSE: First of all, they're a great team. They were a great team last year. But they're a different team. They're playing with much more size this year. Sometimes they played lineups with Jones at the 1 and Jump at the 2 and then you go Iriafeen and Fran and then you got Brink. They're really long.

So I think their identity this year, and obviously I'm an opposing coach so I don't know all the ins and outs, is that they're going to score more points in the paint. They're either going to get that off of offensive rebounds and they have emphasized that and been really successful all year. You look at so many of their close games. Against USC they were like 34-2 in the paint. I mean, that's where their bread and butter lies. They get to the free-throw line. I think their identity is scoring from the inside out and dominating people on the glass. We were, I think we were minus one on the boards, but we played pretty even the entire time, rebounding-wise. But it's definitely a different style team. But the thing that you know about Stanford teams is that they're going to play their system to their strengths because they're so well prepared and so well disciplined.

Q. Charisma, before the, or after Saturday's game Cori said that this was going to be like a dress rehearsal for the NCAA tournament because of how competitive this

conference is. What do you think that you guys have picked up in the last three days that will, you know, just lessons, good bad, indifferent, that will serve you well?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: I think we've just bought into the mission and we've really just been talking about playing with energy and urgency, rebounding, toughness. I think we really just bought into that. Our team talked about this privately and then we talked with the coaches as well is like what we need to do to step up so that we can play together and have fun and be free. I think we've been doing that ever since. Shout out to everyone for just believing in each other and then our coaches for just keep encouraging us.

But I think just our team camaraderie has just been amazing since Saturday's game. But, yeah, it's just been super fun. I feel like even all of the players who aren't seniors they have just been playing so hard for us seniors. So it just means a lot to me and I'm sure it means a lot to the other seniors.

Q. Kiki, you seemed a little bit out of rhythm to start the game. So much so that the coaching staff even sat you down early on in the first quarter. What were they telling you early there to that first trip to the bench and then throughout the game that allowed you to get back into rhythm? And then also how does it feel as a freshman to be trusted by your team in big moments and knock down game-clinching free throws?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I'm going to feel like I started off, like I didn't feel like I was totally out of rhythm. Like, I hit my first shot. Then after that I feel like maybe I messed up a few times. But I think when I got like pulled out coaches just, as always, put confidence in me, tell me what adjustments I need to make. That's really what allows me to go back in the game and just figure it out as I'm in there and kind of knowing my assignment, knowing what to do. Also having and knowing that all my teammates have my back. Like I think today everyone was encouraging each other so much which was super, super helpful. We were just like breathing life into each other. I think that was -- we did an incredible job of that today and I think that's really one of the reasons that allowed us to get this win.

Q. This conference is incredibly deep. You played in the PAC 12 now for five seasons. Can you talk about how much depth and how tough this conference makes you as a player and how it prepares you just for everything, not just the NCAA tournament but professional life afterwards, because it's so many tough teams day after day, week after week?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: It is a really tough conference.

You have to bring your A game every single game. You cannot take any games lightly. But I think what I love most is because it's so tough it helps us for the tournaments coming up. Every team has a different style, so I feel like we're very prepared going into the tournament.

But like you said, yeah, this conference is just really tough. It's been fun playing in this conference and figuring out how people are playing me and figuring out how the people are playing our team. But I've really just enjoyed it these past four years and it's just been really fun.

CORI CLOSE: I want to say, make this very, very clear: As thrilled as we are for this game, and this is a monumental win, we didn't come here to beat Stanford in the semi-finals. We came here to pursue a championship at the highest levels. So I asked them in the locker room, Do you want to celebrate this or do you want to be prepared to go win a championship?

And so, as great as this win is, I want to be very, very clear that as we celebrate the steps that we're taking, this is not at our end game. So we're very, very focused. Both those teams that are playing right now beat us and we need to get our minds right and have a really good game plan to be the tougher more together team on Sunday.

So I just, I didn't want to leave here without making that really clear. As happy as we are about this next step, that's what it was, a next step. And it earns us another chance to play on Sunday. As usual, thank you guys for all the coverage. This is a special tournament and thanks for giving the stories life to these young ladies.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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