

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 7, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

McKenzie Forbes

Rayah Marshall

Postgame Press Conference



USC - 65, Arizona - 62

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: March is really fun. We're grateful to be a part of it. We're grateful to get another game tomorrow. I just want to acknowledge before we start how awesome the pregame ceremony was with Tammy Blackburn and Aaliyah Gayles.

Obviously we have so much respect for Tammy and all that she does for our game, what she's been through. And to have Aaliyah be the first recipient for that award means a ton for our program. Wanted to make sure I said that before we started. They had me crying before the game.

I thought our players came out and really understood the assignment. I think the early energy gave us a boost that quite honestly we really needed.

I'm going to say up here -- it's not just Pac-12-speak, Arizona is a tournament team. They are. They're playing really well at the end. The gauntlet of teams you face in the Pac-12 has made them better and has made them worthy of a bid.

Honestly, I think Cal's a tournament team. You should not end eighth in this conference and take Stanford to the wire -- and I know the final score doesn't look like the wire -- but that was to the wire. We should have eight teams in the tournament and it should include two that are going home today that won big games yesterday against other postseason teams and representing themselves really well.

For us, I think, our team continues to impress me with finding ways to win. I think we're at our best when we get contributions everywhere. I thought we ended up being toughest when toughness was needed. So proud of them. Proud of us. And we get the chance to play tomorrow.

Q. I know that Ju is basically 25. We all talked about that because she's so poised. And she's used to seeing doubles and everything. But super physical. How impressed are you that she continues to stay in a game, not get out of it mentally?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I look at the stat sheet here. I know she would look at it and think it's not her cleanest, not her best, but she still has her highest plus-minus. I just go back to she's a winning player who cares about winning and takes a lot on her shoulders.

And the poise that she operates with helps our team, the competitiveness helps our team. The way she interacts with her teammates. I think they have her back and she has theirs, are all things that are really, really impressive.

At one point she gets hit in the head and has this knot on her head and keeps it out for a second and comes back in. I think the physical and mental toughness is really something that we see every day, but it's really an important part of what makes her so excellent.

Q. Rayah, playing Arizona, you've done it three times the last month. Is it as exhausting as it looks?

RAYAH MARSHALL: Is it, yes? They're a competitive team. I was sitting here looking at some of the statistics. They beat us -- they outscored us in just about every quarter except the first. Like Coach G said, they're a really good team, a tournament team. They compete. Their defense, we felt it the entire game.

I just remember being out their house and they were up 10 with I think it was like five minutes left in the game. They never stopped competing even when we did come back and take that game in double overtime. Super competitive team.

Q. JuJu has 17 points, but that last basket that she made, it was almost like the dagger. What was really impressive that she hung in the air and avoided contact to make that shot. What were your thoughts about that?



LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think I was impressed the most that she had missed the last couple before that and she just -- she knows when it's winning time and we rely on her. They went into a box-and-one or a triangle-and-two and tried to disrupt us.

And she's just elite at getting to her spots, avoiding contact. I do think she takes a lot of contact even on her finishes, but she's so dang strong that she doesn't fall. So she's kind of used to maneuvering in tight spaces, and so that was a big, big play for us.

Q. Rayah, you've played the Arizona schools five times. Arizona three times. Arizona State twice. You have double-doubles in all five of those games. Is there something about the Arizona schools that just rile you up?

RAYAH MARSHALL: It's funny because I've got this ongoing joke with my team. I'm always, like, I just didn't want to go to Arizona. It's ironic that you said that.

But, no, it's March. We're here to win. I don't care what team. If you don't have on USC, then we're here to compete and win.

Q. You answered the first question about JuJu and her poise. When you look at the conference widespread, earlier today we saw Donovyn Hunter. Arizona is starting three freshmen. Could you talk to the poise of the freshmen that we're seeing. I asked Tara, she said earlier they're coming in more prepared, more physical, higher IQ. From your perspective, the freshmen these days?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, we've obviously been in the gym with JuJu every day from the beginning. I keep telling people obviously we believe she's the best one in the country. But it's not because anyone else is lower; it's because she's that good.

Nationally, it's unbelievable. Hannah and Booker and McKayla Williams and Donovyn Hunter, and Arizona's kids. I don't know, we sometimes ask, what are they feeding them now, what are they doing in club basketball? They've come in really ready and it's something to see.

Obviously we have witnessed to JuJu every day and she makes it look easy and it's not easy. But a lot of these kids have made big plays in big moments.

Q. For McKenzie, Rayah has come on strong in the last few games. What kind of lift does she give you when she's playing the way she is lately?

MCKENZIE FORBES: It's huge. Like Coach G said, we're good when we get contributions from everyone. I think when Rayah is down there handling her business like she has been, it just makes it so much easier for everyone else, especially the guards.

And it just gives us that confidence, like when she's hooping, I know we can beat anyone. Super proud of her. I won't tell you what I said to her after the double overtime game at U of A but extremely proud of her. (Laughter).

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I was mic'ed up today. I was like I hope they're beeping it. Everyone asks me what I learned in the NBA. (Laughter). I definitely learned cursing the most. Like being able to drop stuff in, never at anybody but just in sentences.

I'll say this about Rayah, too, obviously she's been tremendous recently. But she's, as there should be, there's so much talk about JuJu and (indiscernible) kids, but Rayah is our heart and soul. She is our middle person.

As good as she was defensively last year she's better this year even, because now she's really good but also quarterbacks us. Last year she was just really good and knows with what she was doing. But now she knows what everyone's doing, which is a huge growth. Our word for it is "juicy."

So Arizona does make it, it is as hard as it looks. But I think it brings out the juice and the competition. And when Rayah is really juicy and everywhere, because of the other pieces we have, too, we feel like that that's when we're at our best.

Q. For Kenzie, they worked really hard to take the ball out of JuJu's hands. And it meant you were doing a lot more handling and play making. I'm wondering how were you working through that role and what are the challenges still of running the offense?

MCKENZIE FORBES: It's interesting. I think Pac-12, every game presents a new challenge. They're obviously a high-pressure team. But there's other teams we face. Like UCLA is quite similar in that regard.

I think in every game I'm coming in, my role might change depending on who we're playing or what kind of coverages they're in. But I try to adapt as best as I can on the fly, make sure I'm always in communication with Coach G and getting people where they need to be, getting the ball where it needs to go.

Q. Lindsay, according to our stats people, you guys

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have won your 11th game by a single digit this season, which is the most in the Pac-12. Considering the new pieces, relying on a freshman like JuJu, what do you feel like allows your team to do that and to be able to, in a game like today, withstand a tough team and just be able to keep coming out on top?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the two words that come to mind are "poise" and "toughness," and toughness to me takes a lot of forms. It's mental toughness and physical toughness. And just the poise.

Ju plays older than her years, but then we have Rayah who played a lot of minutes over the years, and these Ivy grad transfers who were the best players on their respective teams. Like, they've been in big moments, right? Like, they came here to win. They're ridiculously selfless and have taken on whatever role we've asked, but they're hoopers. They're not out here to just get a USC degree -- although that's nice -- and play at this level, they're here to win.

So I think we've got the right mix of people with enough joy that we just kind of make plays without thinking about it and enough thinkers to make sure that we're poised enough to finish games.

I mean, I will say, we've played Kenzie at mostly four positions. Five positions maybe in the flu game, when everybody was out, Rayah included, but the sixth position is coach on the floor.

She literally has the wherewithal to come to me and say I think we can get Ju in here and Rayah here. What do you want us to run? It's really a luxury of mine to have that kind of poise out there, and I think the team takes her lead on that, and they do their jobs, right. They do their jobs with some direction from the leadership on the floor.

Q. The Pac-12 postseason awards came out recently, and JuJu got Pac-12 Freshman of the Year, All Pac-12 team, you got Pac-12 team, how did you feel about JuJu not getting Pac-12 Player of the Year?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: You're baiting me here. Since you all are media members, the first question I have is for the media. And you all put only one of our players on All Conference, right? So not Rayah and not Kenzie, and that's okay, because we're really balanced otherwise. So I can imagine -- but if we have no other All Conference players, then how is JuJu not the Player of the Year? Like, that's surprising to me, but we don't really care.

We think -- again, Cameron's ridiculously good. You saw today The Athletic named them both First Team

All-American. It's not a knock on anyone else. But we know what she does for us. We know show he's impacted a program. She came to a place that -- and credit Rayah tremendously for changing the culture and the narrative, but they came to a program that has not been a perennial top 15 team and not been to two Final Fours, and now we're fifth in the country.

We've had a lot of close games. To me, the impact on winning and what these women have done is the legacy more than an award, but we're going to rock it with our players, and I'm going to be supportive of what I think they've earned.

Q. 16 turnovers in the first half. Number one, what's the secret to going into halftime up five points and also what was the message at halftime to kind of overcome that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I'll talk about the five in the second half. Right? Stop turning the (expletive) over. Bleep it out. Bleep it out. Literally like what we said. They're so good at what they do.

We talked about it taking all five people. It's not watching a point guard handle it. I thought Rayah was arguably our best kind of press. You saw we went to her in the press break every single time because we thought there was an advantage there. Get it in, get it to the next stop. We have three point guards.

But it was as simple as we started out so hot and we knew the heat was going to come, meeting passes, being available, getting out of some of the ball screens they were trapping. Being tougher with the ball, the mental and physical toughness out of it. But to turn the ball over five times in the second half was impressive to me. We know that 16 was way too many in the first half.

Q. McKenzie, there's a lot of nostalgia and reflection on the last season of the Pac-12, but this is also your first. Could you just kind of tell me what it's been like to play in this tournament and just your thoughts on the conference as a whole?

MCKENZIE FORBES: It's actually my second. I played for Coach G my freshman year at Cal. But still a lot of nostalgia. Obviously, I think we'd all agree -- or at least the Pac-12 media -- I think it's the best conference in the country.

Just the talent that's on display every single night. Anyone can beat anyone, as we've seen throughout the whole year. Anytime we finish a game, we're like on our phones watching whoever the next Friday night game is. So

incredible conference with incredible coaches and just blessed to be able to experience it.

Q. Best single day in Pac-12 tournament history in terms of sixth ranked teams, two bubble teams, a rivalry game. This one's close already. I can't remember a day like this in tournament history.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I've been here for a lot of them too. And a lot of experiences, right? But I would say the noon game with Oregon State and Colorado was like an Elite Eight game. That's insane. We were the only conference Top 25 teams playing yesterday on the first day.

So we've talked about it as a group. Finishing second in this league and earning the 2 seed, I'm really, really proud of that. The same way that I tell people that our Final Four year at Cal, going 17-1 in the regular season, is something that I probably value almost more than getting hot.

But we'd have to go back to the archives and say what's the best single day, but in terms of the level of basketball across the board, like I said, there are eight tournament teams playing today.

I think any of the games could be a second weekend type of game that we're going to face, and it makes us all ready for what's coming next, and I'm happy that our players are getting to experience that because it really is special.

Q. Rayah, Kayla Williams only had four points, but they seem to be important buckets, kind of energize your team. As someone who's been a teammate of hers for a couple of years now, could you talk about the impact that Kayla Williams has had on the Trojans?

RAYAH MARSHALL: For sure. Kayla is a competitor. We put her in a game, it's kind of like a relief on everyone on defense; we know she's going to come in, heat the ball up, and do what's necessary -- the tone and tempo she sets for us defensively is just -- like I can't even put into words for you what that's like. It takes pressure off of me and everyone else on the court with us.

And then also just offensively, she orchestrates when it's time, like you said, take those shots, she does. It's really fun to play with her.

Q. Yesterday, JR came in here and she was saying that at this point in the conference tournament, like no one's putting in new plays or anything like that. But, Ray, when you broke the press a couple times I wondered if you were going to come across halftime and call flat. Is that going to happen tomorrow? Are

you ready for that?

RAYAH MARSHALL: That's a question for Coach. (Laughter).

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She would love it if I did. She hit a 3 at the end of our shoot-around today. Mad crazy. She was like, Put that in for me right now; put that in for me right now.

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