

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 8, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

Kaitlyn Davis

JuJu Watkins

Postgame Press Conference



this is an epic one. We know we're not done. We have the privilege to play on Sunday. Probably the only person happier than us is Tara that this game went to multiple overtimes. So we'll try and get ourselves together and try to get ready to do that.

Q. JuJu, first off we saw you went down with the ankle. How are you feeling? Also we saw on you the bench. You tie your shoes, go back in the tunnel, do a little running and check back in. Take me through the moments of deciding that you were going to come back in this game and try to win it for your team?

JUJU WATKINS: Even when I went out, I knew I had to get back in because I think my team needed me. But it's just an ankle. Nothing I'm not used to. Feel great. Ready to play on Sunday.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I did go to watch JuJu at Sierra Cannon High School.

JUJU WATKINS: Same thing happened. It was crazy.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It was a, was it the early morning workout? It was, like, a 6:00 a.m. workout. She's in practice. It's like a preseason thing. And she rolls her ankle.

I'm, like, first of all I was worried. And then I'm we're here at 6:00 a.m. and she's going to sit out the rest. And she comes back in it. And I'm, like, this kid is not normal. She could have sat out. She has played through things before. So I can't say I was surprised.

Q. Kaitlyn, a huge offensive rebound late off the JuJu missed free throw. What was your mindset, especially in the game? It's winning time, it's March. You need big plays and you came up with several of them late?

KAITLYN DAVIS: To be honest our team has been through it very recently actually. I feel like all of us collectively came into it with the confidence, especially when the game is that tight knowing we can lock in and get the win. Because we've done it before. So I think that's just mainly was the mindset, just confidence in knowing

USC - 80, UCLA - 70 (2OT)

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Obviously words aren't going to feel like it does it justice. What an epic evening for women's college basketball, for our program, for the L.A. rivalry. Michelle, you asked about, is this the best tournament ever. I hope we added to that and maybe put an exclamation point on it.

UCLA is so good. There's not a lot of "like" between the schools. Nothing bad. It's just rivalry, but there's a ton of respect. And I think it was a battle. I'm looking at the stat sheet and obviously we won the first quarter decidedly and then they chipped away, won the next three.

For us to be able to persevere in the double overtime, I think it says a ton about the heart and toughness of our team. Our strength coach is amazing. I think everyone hung in there.

I cannot say enough words about these two. The stat sheet does not define and properly show how their guts are still lying on that court. I said this in the postgame thing, Katie chose to go to Columbia, she could go anywhere. She, along with her teammates, changed that program. They're a winning program now.

She came to us with student loans. They pay their way. I've been there. And to come here and do what she's doing on this level is unbelievable, and you guys know you've heard me talk a lot about Ju. Talent notwithstanding -- we think she's the most talented kid around -- but she's a winning player who cares about winning and is so tough to play through a sprained ankle or anything.

I'm just proud of the whole group. This is a team win, but



that we can pull out the win.

Q. I think you sort of answered it when you talked about visiting her at Sierra, but when you look at the last two days, not just tonight -- battered, bruised, bloodied -- she still had the bandage on her elbow from last night, and everything tonight, just the last two days, though, the evolution of toughness, I mean I know you said you weren't surprised but it just seems as if the target was not just on her back, it was just everywhere?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She had a big old knot on her head last night. Bloodied, things like that. At some point we've got to keep her from taking this much contact. I actually don't think it's the way it's supposed to be.

She's an incredibly physical player. Great body control. I think she gets a lot of and-1s that aren't called because she doesn't fall down because she's so strong. I think eventually she'll get officiated the way she should.

But for the toughness factor, there's not enough words to say that, given what we've seen this year, she continues to impress us with her demeanor. Can I tell them about the shoes?

We had our pregame meal today, and we went into like a side room after, and she got shoes. Like, she bought shoes for the entire team and the entire staff and the entire support staff. I didn't know this was coming. This was her, probably with the help of her mom to organize it, just to show gratitude for the team.

She's just different. And I think that's why the team has her back so much and that when she picked up her fourth, Coach B said, in the huddle, in terms of we wanted to protect her not get the foul. She has our back; let's have her back. They were all, let's go.

It's something really special. I've said it a lot: The maturity of the rest of our players make it work, and we want this season to continue on for as long as possible because it feels special.

Q. JuJu, for you, you said that you're used to this. You've been going through this. But did the last two days feel, maybe because they were back-to-back nights, some of the roughest that you've gone through?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, this is my first March. I'm being thrown in the fire. I'm taking it one day at a time but it's just a great feeling regardless of the physicality and whatever is going on, I'm just glad to be a part of it.

Like Coach said before the game, we're blessed to be in this position. So many teams are going home every day. It's important that we leave it all out on the floor. Whatever happens with the refs, whatever happens, no call/call, it's game time.

Q. Lindsay, I know obviously the game just finished, but have you been able to reflect on just the fact that this program's now back in the tournament championship game for the first time in a decade? You're doing it this year with JuJu and this kind of new-look team. And just how incredible that is just to be able to get to that stage against a team like Stanford to go for the title too?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Definitely haven't been able to kind of process what happened in this game. I feel like there's so many moments. We'll watch the film. We were talking about something in the locker room, and Kenzie said, was that in the first time or regulation?

The K.D. offensive rebound play, we call that the Ivy special -- that's what won us the Arizona game where she kicked it out to K.P. And this time it was K.P. to Kenzie. We'll put that in the playbook.

I feel like it's not lost on us what we're doing because, first of all, every year's different, and every season is kind of a lifetime, as Coach K said in his book. When it's so enjoyable to come to work every day and you feel like you're having an impact bigger than just what we're doing, it definitely is special in that sense.

I've said it before. One of the coolest things about the attention that we're getting, the attention that JuJu is getting, and the team, it shines a light on how amazing Cheryl Miller was and Tina and Lisa and Coop and the McGee twins. It just brings them back in the spotlight that they were and are the greatest of all time.

They're not just the greatest USC players; they're the greatest women's players. And because of how great this young woman is and her teammates, it's shining a light on that.

We're honored to be part of this kind of resurgence or whatever this moment in women's basketball, so that's not lost on us, even though we're just trying to do what we need to do for tomorrow. So we're going to obviously focus on a game plan for Stanford.

But to your question, yeah, I do think there's a bigger thing at play, and we're really enjoying that and I'm grateful every day to be in this situation with this group.

Q. JuJu, there's a couple of moments in the game, like you're knocked down, you're crawling along the ground to try to get back into play, you're playing with four fouls and an overtime, and you get in for the tie-up. How can you help us understand and describe this competitive piece of you, where it comes from, how it lives in these moments?

JUJU WATKINS: Honestly, I think it just comes from the team. Having so many great people around me, always trusting in me, believing in me, it makes me who I am. So I'm just grateful to be part of this team.

We were talking about it, like Ivys, this is their last year. We don't know what's going to happen next year. So we're really taking advantage of everything in the space we're in, the team we have now. And we owe it to our seniors -- Otto and the Ivys. We've got to play hard every game and that's why I play so hard.

Q. Lindsay, Cori was in here talking about evaluating the things that they need to do better. And you're on the other side -- you're on the winning side of a very narrow victory and you've got a big game on Sunday and then obviously the tournament after that. How much evaluation -- like what would you say from this game are things that you all need to do better that you need to take into the next game and into the tournament?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It was, like, a bruising, physical game. Nothing about it was particularly pretty except for the beauty of toughness. We only had 10 turnovers against a UCLA team that puts a lot of heat. I'm proud of that.

Obviously we started the last two games hot and let teams back in. How can we execute better when they bring stuff? I think we had some scoring droughts there. I thought defensively we were pretty solid and locked in.

They pose a lot of problems. They're really good. As we know, they have been and probably still should be in contention for a 1 seed. They're really good so they test you on every level.

I would say we missed a couple of shots, I would say that we're capable of making. There's a stretch where they got some offensive rebounds continuously although over the course of 50 minutes, with how well the offensive rebounding, we did a pretty good job. I would just say execution and getting to what we want and making sure we don't have scoring droughts like we did.

Q. There were a couple times JuJu went down physically writhing with the ankle. Was there ever a moment in your mind that you thought, like, oh, crap, we're going to be playing the rest of this game without her, that sort of thing? What was going through your head?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: The initial injury happened like, what, a minute in. Obviously I sort of prepared for the possibility, right, mentally.

But, like I said, she's not like a kid who five times a game is down and we're helping her out and she's back. I knew it was significant. But I also wasn't as shocked at I might have been that she came back just knowing her toughness level.

But I'm always kind of preparing -- what's next? Who's up next? And that's what you have to do. But I guess my gut feeling was that if there was a possible way she could come back, she would.

Q. Cori mentioned -- you said in contention for a possible No. 1 seed. Cori said there could be three No. 1 seeds in this conference. First, do you agree with that? And secondly, how much of this game is kind of just an ode to the Pac-12 and how incredible the conference has been this year?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We've all said it all year, I think it's made us all better. When I first started watching film for UCLA back the first time we were going to play them, I wasn't finding a lot of weaknesses. I just knew we were going to have to be really good. And the first time we weren't good enough, and we got better. It challenged us to be better.

I haven't dug into everyone's resumé the way I would maybe if we're on the bubble and you're living and dying by a NET rating. I've done that. I've been there.

Obviously South Carolina is a 1 seed and after that it's been kind of up in the air. And Ohio State lost today. If you're watching Pac-12 basketball and the gauntlet that we've all gone through, I don't think it's unfathomable at all to think there could be three 1 seeds. I don't know how the committee will see it, but I don't think it's too farfetched.

Q. Can you just talk to me about the battle with Clarice? We know you're a two-way player, but can we talk about how the defensive -- Charisma, I'm sorry -- her guarding you on the other end?

JUJU WATKINS: She's a great defensive player. Going into the game I played against that before, just seeing them

a couple of times. I knew what to expect coming into the game. Very physical, and I just know I had to play my pace and try to make the best decision every time.

Q. You mentioned yesterday that you thought the Oregon State-Colorado game looked like an Elite Eight game. What did this one feel like to you?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I feels like it could be a Final Four game. The level I hope we're not facing a team as good as UCLA prior to that. But it felt like -- the atmosphere was amazing.

Obviously we brought the cross-town showdown to Vegas. I thought the crowd was great. I thought there were big plays on every side. It was just an unbelievable basketball game.

Q. JuJu, when the buzzer hit, it looked like the first person you hugged was Otto. And I know you just mentioned her talking about seniors. Just curious if you could share a little bit what that initial moment was like with her right after it was final?

JUJU WATKINS: I feel like Otto, we always find each other in big moments. That's my dog, my roommate, my best friend. She's really helped me this year just getting through everything, being a freshman and just coming into it not really knowing what to expect.

And she's kind of helped me down. Shout-out to Otto. It's her birthday. Everybody sing happy birthday. It's her birthday.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Birthday on Sunday. She's been talking about playing in the championship game for two months. Otto can I get through practice on Tuesday. And she's, like, Pac-12 championship game, March 12th. We've got it circled for her.

Q. Clarice Akunwafo only played eight minutes today, but by my count Lauren Betts did not score a single point when Clarice was on the floor. What about her game do you think allows her to guard Lauren so well because there was a similar story the last time you guys matched up?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yup, and I would imagine we'll see a lot of Clarice on Sunday with her size. She did great there too. C is an incredible athlete, pound for pound, physically, she's a great individual defender.

And I went into the game saying they have one Lauren Betts and we have Rayah, C and K.D., who can battle her. But it allows you to play a little one-on-one coverage

against her because she's so big and such a good positional defender. She knows her role and plays her role as well as anybody.

And we've talked about this. As much attention as there is on our starters -- and there should be -- Ju carries a huge load. Our Ivy transfers and Rayah, we put a lot on their shoulders.

But our bench really matters. Kayla Williams has won us games off the bench. Taylor Bigby knocking down 3s. Clarice -- we don't beat UCLA the first time, probably don't beat them tonight without her minutes.

So the Stanford game -- we value everybody. We know what they can bring. And I think they're really understanding what their roles are and buying into them, and that's huge for us.

Q. JuJu, everyone talks about how great of an offensive player you are, but you're also everywhere on the defensive ends -- steals, blocks, incredibly active on the boards, hustle. How much pride do you take in that part of your game?

JUJU WATKINS: Coach B, she's been on my tail about just being better on defense. I had some games where I kind of didn't lock in fully in the game plan. Just making sure I'm in the green for the rest of the season, really. I'm really locking in on defense, making sure every possession matters on both ends.

Q. Coach, before you were in here, Coach Close said there needs to be some sort of system in place to have officials maybe hold themselves accountable. I don't want to get you in trouble. I saw you at one point sort of say similar things to the refs when JuJu got fouled a couple times. What's your reaction maybe to the thought of having officials need to speak after games or something like that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I've suggested the one thing that could be helpful, like when I was in the NBA, they do a pool report, like a last two-minute pool report, where you just get an explanation. I don't think you can have them explain 50 minutes of calls, obviously.

I mean, I know they're doing the absolute best. This was a physical game. This was a hard game to officiate. I just want them to understand we have different players who do different things. And if, for example, if JuJu gets fouled 14 times, she should go to the free-throw line that many times.

I think a pool report at the end would be neat. But I don't think any other kind of thing is realistic in terms of having

them speak about calls. We just want the officiating to be at the level of game play. And I think they have a really hard job, and everyone's got to battle through it.

(Laughter)

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

Q. JuJu, you mentioned a little bit earlier about kind of going through your first March, going through the grind of it. Obviously these rivalry games are already intense, even in the regular season. For you, what elevated it in this game compared to the two regular season match-ups that upped the intensity even more? Obviously more stakes on the line, but in the actual game itself, what were the differences you were feeling?

JUJU WATKINS: I think a lot comes with a rivalry just to be able to have this opportunity to, like Coach said, bring L.A. to Vegas. It's just a great atmosphere. And I don't know, to my knowledge, I don't know if that's been done before on this stage this late in the finals or whatever. But it's just a great game. We know that they bring a lot. We bring a lot, too.

So everybody's pumped up. I mean, the goal is to win every time. But I guess when we see familiar faces, that fuels you up a little more, too.

Q. JuJu, I imagine when you committed to USC, you had an idea that there was going to be some build involved, just the way this program has been over the past few years. Did you ever think that in your first year you'd already have the opportunity to compete for a championship on Sunday? And just what has this pace been like for you?

JUJU WATKINS: I'm not going to lie, I did not think this would happen this soon. But I guess timing is everything, and I'm glad that we're here. This group -- it means everything. And I'm just blessed, honestly. But, yeah, better than anything I ever could have hoped for really.

Q. JuJu, we've talked about a really physical game today. But you're used to that. You get everyone's best defender. How does your bun never move? The people want to know. Can you give us a --

JUJU WATKINS: I love this last question. I'm going to say holding spray. I'll let you know that.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's coming. We've got an NIL thing coming.

Q. NIL deal?

JUJU WATKINS: We'll see, I don't know.

