

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Emily Bessoir

Angela Dugalic



Q. A lot of excitement and expectations around this team. Both the media and coaches picked you guys to finish second in the preseason poll. What excites you and what are the big picture storylines coming in?

CORI CLOSE: We have a lot of really talented players and we have great depth. We have height along the front line. I think we have kids that have a lot of character, work ethic, and they're very driven, and so I don't have to beg anyone to get into the gym.

I actually think that's probably the most powerful piece of this particular team.

It's one thing to have talent, but when you have character and work ethic to back it up, that's going to be the key.

Q. It's quite something to go from being unranked a year ago to being ranked in the top 5 in the country. Talk about the freshman class coming in a year ago and what they were able to do.

CORI CLOSE: Hire people smarter than you and recruit people that are really, really good. That's a really good starting point. But I think that that was the big -- we knew they were really talented group, but how would they progress along the way.

I think all of them, and I think every freshman, I always tell all the parents, every freshman wants to quit a dozen times and transfer a dozen times. It's hard. But that's also why you grow so much.

If you have a group of young people that are willing to hang in there, and my dad used to say what are they going to do when they hit the wall, and they all hit the wall at different points, but they all found a way around the wall, over the wall, through the wall, and they really developed into something that could be really special long-term.

Q. How are you integrating your new players? You've got a lot of players returning. You've got a lot of fundamental base there from the team that you had last year. How are your new players coming in and in particular Lauren and how she's moving into your post game?

CORI CLOSE: Well, Lauren has already fit in very, very well for us. She fit a very big need. I had the opportunity to coach her with the U-19 World Cup team with USA Basketball, so I think it gave me a little bit of a hint how to integrate both her skill set but her mentality, so that's been an advantage.

But I think the one people aren't talking about that is going to make such a huge impact with that is Angela Dugalic. She has really put in the work. She has expanded her game. She can guard multiple positions. She can score in multiple ways. She's really developed into a three-level scorer for us.

I think the new players combined -- we have a really good mix. Maybe the first time in my time at UCLA, such a great mix of not only talent sets and versatility but also age and experience, and so I think we have a really good mix of youth and enthusiasm that are really continuing to grow but also some experience and versatility on that front.

Q. Someone that really speaks to me is Londynn Jones. A year ago, a highly recruited player comes in, spends most of the year coming off the bench, and what an impact she had, and on the summer she's on the USA Basketball team and was impactful there, too. That speaks to what you're going to have this year.

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's about filling needs and really strengthening your puzzle, and her ability to pick up the ball full court, I thought she was an incredible difference maker in our second round game versus Oklahoma. London came in and really guarded their point guard who was getting downhill on us on a consistent basis. You've got 5'3" London Jones coming into a new and improved roles this year, and then you've got 6'7" Lauren Betts who's coming in that way. So I really like the way that our new

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players are really filling needs, and I think Londynn Jones is a great example of that.

Q. Not to mention the return of Charisma Osborne.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, obviously I've been asked that several times today, were you surprised at Charisma coming back, and yes, but I really trusted her process. She was going to trust her gut.

She was going to listen to what was best for her life, but I'm not sure I've ever seen her mentality more consistent, more steady than it has been so far this year.

Q. Here's the situation: Some folks may have fallen asleep on UCLA in the last couple years. What have they been missing?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that they've been missing a building process of kids really dreaming big and saying, hey, we want to build this thing not only back to where it was but we want to take it to new heights.

I'm inspired by young people that are willing to come into a situation and try to dream about something that is new and different and do it a different way. I'm sort of a different kind of head coach in that way.

I am grateful and I'm inspired by our young people that are willing to say, hey, we respect the trails that have been blazed before us, but we here to do something that has not been done before. You've maybe been missing the start of that, but it's not too late, jump on board with us. We're excited about what's next.

Q. I've got to ask you about the international trip you guys took. Senegal and Germany, got to go to Emilie Bessoir's hometown. How was that experience and what did your team learn from it?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think we did all the fun stuff, Jet skis, safari, all these amazing things, but I think really all it was about (audio glitch) was about deep in history and entering into other people's world. I honestly have to go back, you talk about what we were missing a few years ago, with the height of racial injustice, and when MTAD was formed within our program, they said our next foreign trip has to include Africa, that was an absolute commitment that we were unwavering on, and really credit Lauren Miller, Michaela Onyenwere, Kiara Jefferson, who were big parts of that. And I thought about them the whole time, especially on the first day when we visited Goree Island and just the depth of that experience and then partnered with NBA Africa to do a clinic there and really powerful day.

But probably the other favorite thing is entering into Emilie Bessoir's world and seeing Munich through her eyes and her history and her family, and obviously Lina Sontag, as well. She's just a little younger in our program. But that was such a big privilege to be able to sort of say, okay, you've taken this big leap of faith to come and join us and help us see your town and what you're proud of and your people and let us see that through your eyes, and that was really, really rewarding.

Q. One of my favorite Instagram reels was Emilie going around the training room and trying to teach people to speak German, so when they hit Germany they would have some things to say, and it was wildly entertaining. It speaks to your team and the kind of outreach they do?

CORI CLOSE: I have a hard enough time -- they were just teasing me at lunch, hard enough time saying their names right in English consistently, so Germany was way -- German was a over my head, but she did an excellent job.

Q. Cori, the conference added a postseason award this year. It's the Tammy Blackburn Inspiration Award, and I think it's amazing. I don't know if it's officially been announced, but it's going to a player, coach, or staff member who exhibits courage, resilience, and unbreakable spirit in overcoming adversity, and Tammy Blackburn is a colleague and dear friend of ours who is battling metastatic breast cancer. She just had a very intense surgery a couple days ago and is recovering.

So Tammy, if you're watching, one, we love you, but two, can you tell me from the coach's perspective how it was presented to you guys and how you voted so quickly to decide to add this award and what this means?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's sort of a no-brainer because we've been so deeply affected by that. You know, Tammy, this is so Tammy, too. We lost someone very close to us in the UCLA program in Jan Cloyde who battled metastatic breast cancer. Really honestly for 30 years she's going back and forth with different bouts of that. Who showed up at her memorial service that we were hosting at UCLA, Tammy Blackburn.

I just think in the midst of all that she's battling, she wanted to come and honor Jan. I just think that's how she's done things for so many. So for us to respond to that award and to be able to get on board with that, how could you not, when you're around someone like Tammy who's set the stage of being -- I just think we have a choice every day to be a giver or a taker, and to watch Tammy in the midst of her circumstance choose consistently to be a giver, I just

think it's an honor to be a part of continuing her legacy.

Q. I also want to compliment you on your connectivity to the WNBA. You are very intentional with your program to make sure that you pull through and see the Sparks and whoever is in town to play them and that you have put some of the most incredible human beings into the league in Jordin Canada and Michaela Onyenwere for example. I get to see Mick all the time in Phoenix. Thank you for that. What is it about UCLA basketball that prepares players for the next level?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's a commitment we made early on that we were going to have parallel paths of commitment, of excellence, and one is we wanted to become a championship-level program obviously in college, but most I would say 80, 90 percent of our players have a dream to play in the WNBA.

Having a skill development program that really not only encompasses what it takes to be successful in college but what does it take to be successful in the WNBA, what are the trends, what's happening in international and FIBA basketball, how do you work together with that.

And so I have an incredible -- it's not only my assistant coaches but our video team, our player development staff have really been committed from studying film to analytics to our individualized player development plans, that they reflect a commitment to not only prepare them for being successful in college, but for the next level, as well.

And that was just a part of our mission from the very start.

Q. You've got a great right out of the gate against Purdue.

CORI CLOSE: Here we go. Well, I think I actually made a mistake when I had the No. 1 recruiting class, Jordin Canada and that group their freshman year probably over scheduled --

Q. That UConn game perhaps.

CORI CLOSE: UConn, Texas, I mean, you name it. We had the No. 1 most difficult schedule in the country that year in the non-conference, but I think this year I really think our team could handle it. I thought we had a different level of experience and maturity.

We've got Purdue, we've got Princeton, and then we've got obviously UConn, Arkansas, Florida State, Ohio State. It's going to be jam packed, and of course I'm probably for getting someone, but the reality for us is if we are going to talk about having championship habits, you have got to be

able to enter into the ring and face whatever it exposes, and so we're excited to do that and we're very focused on the habits it's going to take to get there, and I think that's going to be an important part of the process.

Q. We heard Coach talk about the trip. What was it like to be with your team?

EMILY BESSOIR: It was amazing. From Senegal to Germany, obviously that was close to my heart, but we had so much fun and we did a lot and were educated on a lot of things, but also just had fun as a team.

ANGELA DUGALIC: Yeah, it was truly inspiring. Senegal was probably my favorite. Munich is a beautiful town and Berlin was so riveting, but Senegal just blew me away with their beauty.

Q. Tell us more about Senegal because you guys really immersed yourself in that place and what struck you as you walked around and experienced it.

ANGELA DUGALIC: Yeah, so we were in Dakar for the most part, and then the first day after we landed, we went to Goree Island and just learned about the history there, how it impacted not only the Senegalese people, but just all of Africa and the United States, most continents, honestly.

And then we got to play with the girls that lived on Goree Island and some off, but we got to do a little camp with them, and it was so, so fun, and just learned about them, learned about their culture, and then the next day we went to NBA Africa to play against the Senegalese team, and those girls who were at the camp, they came to come watch us at the game, and it was just so fun to see them again.

Q. What's it like to be here? You missed all of last year with an ACL tear. How is your health, and how does it feel to know you're back in the mix?

ANGELA DUGALIC: Yeah, thank God, I'm good. I've been playing without the brace. That was a really big thing for me.

It's really not even the physical part that I am worried about, it's more the mental part. It's still a work in progress, of course. I think it will be for a couple months, maybe even years. But I'm getting through it, and I feel great when I play.

Q. Can you talk about integrating new players into the team and the way that it's shaping your culture, your chemistry and just how you think that's going?

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EMILY BESSOIR: Yeah, I mean, most of our team came back from last year, and we have two new players with Lauren Betts and Amanda Muse and they've been great. They've been sponges and just learning how we do things, how we train, our standards, and then obviously the freshman class from last year, which are all sophomores now, they are amazing. It's just amazing to see their growth from last year to this year, and it's been super fun, and they also make it easy to integrate new players, but also it goes both ways, so the new players but also the people that are there.

Q. One person that I've heard mentioned so much with you is Cameron Brown and what she meant to your recovery from the ACL injuries because she went through that and what she's been able to contribute to your team. I'd love to hear your comments about Cam and overall her impact in your program because it's pretty profound.

ANGELA DUGALIC: Yeah, I mean, last year with my injury, her and Em were the ones who helped me out the most. I wasn't in a good mental state, but she kept trying to integrate me into the team and bring me in and just bring life into me.

That just shows what kind of person she is. I wasn't even playing. A lot of people can just disregard the person who isn't playing, but she looks at us like sisters and teaches us -- I find her like a teammate but also like a coach because she's capable of doing both.

EMILY BESSOIR: Definitely what Angela said. Cam is such a warrior, like you said. She's been through that injury before, a few times unfortunately, but she has so much joy playing out there and she's such a glue for us and so important and having everyone stick together.

Q. I heard you're both into art. Is that true? Can you share your artistic edge?

EMILY BESSOIR: Yeah, I just love being creative, and it's so cool because a lot of my teammates are, too, so we'll have paint nights at some of our apartments or just honestly any kind of art. I go through phases. I love crocheting and a former teammate of ours she's super good in that, too, and just all of that. That kind of gets your mind off of it and is therapeutic.

Q. What's the best thing you've ever crocheted?

EMILY BESSOIR: I'm not the best at crocheting, but I've painted a lot lately.

ANGELA DUGALIC: I used to do a lot of art in high school and when I was younger, so then when I got to college I sort of stopped, but recently they've, I guess, brought me back into it, and I found a love for it again. It's like a nice escape really to disassociate. I do a lot of things to do that because I feel like my real life is just so overwhelming sometimes, and I just need something that will calm me down and make me not think about everything that's going on.

Q. You have your team this year, but you also have the Serbian National Team and the German National Team who will be playing each other in an Olympic qualifying tournament in Brazil in February, so you guys will be -- I understand you're both going to be able to go play. Coach is going to let you go. What's that going to be like playing against each other in Brazil in February?

ANGELA DUGALIC: That is going to be very interesting. It's going to be weird because right now we're clearly wearing the same uniform, and all of a sudden we're going to have to switch. She played against the Serbian National Team during the summer. I wasn't on that team.

I think it'll be a really good game, and it can go both ways, of course.

But our goal is of course to be top 3 and to make it into the Olympics, and I think both teams are very, very capable of that.

EMILY BESSOIR: Yeah, it's an amazing opportunity. For my country, for Germany, it's one of the first times that we've ever been at that qualifying tournament.

It's also huge for our coach to let us go because when she recruited us, she said, we'll make national teamwork. It's one thing to say that but another thing to actually go through with it, especially during that time of the year. We're both really grateful that we're able to go, and obviously it's super exciting.

We watched the draw together. We were on the phone and saw that we'll both be in Brazil, and that's just amazing. Basketball takes you places where you didn't even know you were going to go, and even just living in LA being from Europe is amazing, and now being able to see and now play in another country.

Q. Can you both talk a little bit about your experience playing internationally and what you bring to UCLA basketball with international experience under your belt?

ANGELA DUGALIC: Yeah, I started playing with the senior team at age 17, so a lot of the girls, women, were older than me, so I viewed them as sisters, they viewed me as a daughter. It was sort of like -- just like a deer trying to watch. Ass first it was very shaky and then as I got older I learned how to walk.

But yeah, so I feel like I bring a lot more to the table when I go to college just because the European style of play and the American style of play are very different, but also very elite.

I think it's a really big asset to be able to do both and to be versatile in those, and I think both of us, because of our experiences from before, are able to do that.

EMILY BESSOIR: Yeah, I agree with what Angela said. Also like the European game is a lot more physical or a lot more is allowed to do, like screening, you're able to do moving screens and all of that, and then I even think with playing with older players, they'd have so much experience. They've played pro already, and I even realized this summer how much I learned from my teammates and then playing against other professional players like that IQ part of the game.

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