

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Media Day

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

JuJu Watkins

Rayah Marshall



certainly aren't satisfied with just that, but it was a huge piece for us in terms of ultimately getting to where we want to go, and I'll be forever grateful for that group. I don't think I'll ever forget that group.

Q. How is the baby?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's great. She's a chatterbox. She's a bundle of joy. Jordan is six and he has gotten so into basketball that he was quizzing me on who's here from other teams. I think he thought we were playing 2 on 2. I said, there is no actual basketball.

Q. Tell me about your team this year. I know obviously you've got two terrific players and one of the new incoming freshmen that everyone is excited to meet, but what excites you about this group?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Oh, man, the competitive nature. I think heading into year three, our culture is really strong. I know people throw that word around a lot, but coming into practice every day, they raise the bar. They're fun to be around. They're really about winning. They're about one another. We've got some talent in that gym. But really I think it's that collective identity of trying to get USC basketball back to heights that we've been at in the past, and it's an exciting journey.

Q. Lindsay, a year ago, you make it to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since '14. So much conversation over the years about USC not making it, worrying are you going to make it. Beating Stanford in that amazing grind of a defensive game, what did last season mean and what kind of step was it for you guys?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It was huge. I think it began with the trust of the players. We had players that returned and really kind of agreed to buy into a new level of effort and energy, and then we had a number of transfers come in who were interested in making a name for what USC can be for playing in the NCAA Tournament, and I think that's what kind of bound us together all year, that collective desire to get back to the tournament, and we did it. We

Q. As I was getting here this morning, I was texting with a good friend of mine, Coach Billy Hemburger, who is very emotionally invested with your program. For the locals, I'm sure they're interested. And Aaliyah Gayles, talk a little bit about her progress, but also how inspiring she's been for the rest of the roster to see what she's gone through and where she's at.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I appreciate the question. So this time last year, Aaliyah was really -- had just learned to walk again, was getting into a day-to-day routine, and where she's come is just -- it's nothing short of miraculous. I don't say that lightly.

It's unbelievable to see the impact she's made on our team and now she's fully cleared, she's full-on practicing, which is unbelievable. She still has a ways to go to get back to where she wants to be and who she wants to be but there's not a day that goes by that she is not an invaluable member of our team. Her energy, her joy, her resilience. I mean, she's lived it, right, and I think our team just loves her as a human being, but when they stop and think about what she's fought through to get here, it's no doubt that it's on our minds as an inspiration all the time. She's a pretty remarkable young woman.

Q. Regarding your ability, whether at Cal or USC, to put people into the WNBA, I take you back to Layshia Clarendon and what they have done to impact the W all the way to Kadi Sissoko who I got to talk about all season long in Phoenix. What is it about your philosophy that prepares players for the next level?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Well, first of all, if you recruit and coach good players, you're fortunate to be in that situation.

But I think my role is just understanding the pro game, trying to make our practices pro-like and while we're talking about practice, shout out to our players who are stopping practice for a minute to watch us. I want to say hello to



them.

But you have to design practices to make sure you're not just trying to get players better for what you need them to do tomorrow, but what they want to do five years down the road.

I pride myself on trying to have players ready for the next level. Maybe terminology is different, but that they understand coverages, they understand spacing on the floor, and whoever coaches them next can mold them how they like.

But I really try to listen to what players' goals are, and if they want to get to the next you try and help them get there. And now the next level of that is helping players preserve their bodies or understand recovery, because hopefully some of these young women can play 15 years down the line after us.

And so to try and get them ready for that is something that I really take pride in.

Q. Speaking of getting players ready, how are you getting JuJu ready for the attention she's going to receive, the expectation that will be on her as the nation's No. 1 recruit?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Gosh, there's so much I can say about JuJu. Number one, she walks in the door ready. She's ready for anything that's coming her way physically, mentally, to her village around her they've done an incredible job. But it goes back to that relationship building.

The situation in coaching JuJu is like nothing I've ever had the opportunity to do before, so I go in saying, hey, let's navigate this new thing together, building a relationship with her for several years I think helps because that trust in me and with her is going to be what allows her to do all the things she's capable of doing.

I want her to be able to be a typical freshman and have all those experiences and struggle with things and learn from things, but at the same time with the recognition I have she's anything but typical. Going into it with that duality of awareness I think will give us a chance to allow her to shine but really I need to get out of the way and allow her to be her because she's so special.

Q. The bedrock a year ago was defense and the buy-in from so many different players from so many different places, in games it was one thing, but to see it in practice was another. When you add some talented people to that, defensively can you replicate what you

did a year ago, can you be better than 10th in the country? It was one of the more locked down defenses I've seen in a long time.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, it was something to behold, a group of people that had never played together coming in and having common denominator be our willingness to defend.

As you know, Coach Beth Burns, there's no one better in terms of helping instill that defense. Can we be better than that? I think the mentality remains. We have a group of people who really care about that end of the floor who want to defend, but each team is a little bit different, and I hope that we're scoring a lot more points than last year. I think we're capable of that.

There will be more possessions, we'll play faster, but what won't change is the mindset that we want to dominate other people, shut them down, as well.

But who knows if the numbers will be exactly the same. At the end of the day it's about winning, and if we win more games I think we'll all be happy.

Q. One of the players who is that lock-down defensive mindset is here with you today. Rayah Marshall, second in the nation in blocked shots per game last year. Talk a little bit about her before she joins us and what you've seen from her in the off-season and what you need from her this season.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Well, she's the fittest she's ever been. We have a strength coach, Coach Kelly Dormandy, who has done wonders with our entire team, so I think Rayah has hit another level of fitness.

Her growth and maturity has been just something I take a lot of pride and enjoy being part of. She played for USA Basketball this summer. To see her embrace that opportunity as a leader, she's become a vocal leader and a day-to-day leader for us, and she just has such a knack protecting that rim, and her shot blocking excites people. It energizes people, and so obviously we're excited to have her patrolling the paint for us.

Q. I know you are a proud Ivy League graduate, so you go out and bring in three Ivy Leaguers as grad transfers. What is it about the Ivy League player and USC and the connection that you've developed?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First of all, they're way better than me. The Ivy League level of basketball has grown tremendously. I think there's something unique about it. The transfer portal is something that's here to stay, but Ivy

League players could not stay for their COVID year. It's not allowed. So it's unique in that they come with coaches behind them from their previous schools who are super supportive, with teams, with the whole league, so it's kind of been a neat thing where I have all the Ivy coaches rooting for our success and their success.

But they're all hoopers. I mean, they're really good, the three of them, Kayla Padilla, McKenzie Forbes, and Kaitlin Davis contribute significantly for us. They've played a lot of basketball. They've had significant roles, and they want to win, and I think that that balance of really mature older kids with such young talent like JuJu and we have Malia Samuels, another freshman, and Taylor is younger.

That's kind of a neat mix, but they're going to be hugely important to our team this year, and we'll probably be the only ones in the country talking about that Brown-Dartmouth game Friday night and what happened, but I've got three of them who care about it like I do.

Q. You've been attached to this conference for a long time. This would have been your team's last year in the conference regardless of what happens, but obviously this is the last year for the conference generally. I wanted to know if that's in your thoughts today?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Nope. I mean, my thoughts today are the tremendously talented young women who are here, the coaches that do such an incredible job, and the strength of this league. That really is what it's about today.

What the focus should be on for the entirety of this season, there's so much good basketball in front of us, and that's what we're thinking about.

Q. I saw an Instagram about Cheryl Miller coming to your practice, in my opinion, the greatest player to ever play women's basketball. What's it like when she's communicating to somebody like Rayah Marshall, because Rayah has a lot of the talents that Cheryl had?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, it's goosebumps whenever I get to talk to Cheryl, interact with her. She's been wonderful to me and to us. She's been around a lot. She's become a mentor and friend to me, but she walks in that gym, and you're right, she is the GOAT of women's basketball. She wore that USC jersey and now JuJu and Rayah get to pick her brain and talk to her. It's unreal.

I do think women's basketball has come a long way in terms of coverage but we don't tell those stories enough. Particularly head coach at USC to be able to link that

incredible history not just for USC, but all of women's basketball, with these young women we have here trying to do their own thing, and the two young women we have with us today I think really benefit from being around someone like Cheryl Miller.

Q. What was so good back there?

RAYAH MARSHALL: We were back there plotting on TikTok dancing because I was laughing because I'm limited amount of TikToks I can work with.

Q. JuJu, welcome to the Pac-12. Welcome to media day. The only true freshman here today. What's it been like? I know the spotlight is pretty bright.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, our season is just getting started to I'm ready for all the questions. We've been here since last night, so we're just excited to be here.

Q. For me, for both of you guys, you could go anywhere, any school, play for anybody. Why USC, and why Lindsay Gottlieb?

RAYAH MARSHALL: For me, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to play up under our head coach, Coach Lindsay Gottlieb, but for both us being from California, actually born and raised in Los Angeles, California, it's an honor to rep this jersey, rep three letters across our chest.

The fierce competitor of a head coach we have and the talent that we are blessed to have, Coach Lindsay instills a lot of knowledge of the game of basketball in us, and I'm grateful to have that this far in my career, personally for me.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I feel like going on visits, I felt like it was a family here, like I was close to all my teammates and coaches and staff, and even the coaches from other sports, it just felt like a family at USC, and I'm just glad to be a part of that.

Q. What's the biggest adjustment been, JuJu?

JUJU WATKINS: Just the routine of it all, like waking up so early. I'm not used to that for that long of a time period. Honestly, waking up and just playing basketball.

Q. Aside from wanting to know your favorite TikTok dance challenges, you have a couple of ladies from Las Vegas, Tay Biggs and Aaliyah Gayles. I really want to know about Aaliyah. When you see what she went through, we all have our trials and tribulations every single day, but this is a young lady that less than two years ago was rid would with bullets and now

she's ready to step on the court. How inspirational for both of you is it to see what she's gone through and now she's ready to play? She was once one of the top recruits in the nation.

RAYAH MARSHALL: Yeah, shout-out to AG. First and foremost, she's a dog. We'll get out there and days we're conditioning, I remember a couple times earlier during the summer I felt like I emptied my tank, I had no more, and I would look at AG, I'm thinking, geez, if she can do it, she's coming over there motivating me, she's telling me like, Ray it's like no limits to where you can go to, where you can take it.

Just as a teammate I get like a sister comfort from her. She's so intriguing to watch. Like when I'm out there during practice she's out there throwing amazing passes, asking me how can I be better, how can I throw you better passes, where can I grow my game.

She's a great person, and she just brings like positive energy and vibes to me, like I said, somewhat like a younger sister, and we'll forever cherish that.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, just to see her out there. I used to play with her. We played together on the AAU circuit, so to get to see her now, it's amazing and what she's been there, she's really a testament of the love for the game and the passion. She is always in practice giving her 100 percent every day. Always got a smile on her face. I'm just glad that I get to be a part of this team and get to see her every day because she's funny. We're all like a familiar think there, so just to see her, laugh with her, and play with her.

RAYAH MARSHALL: She's also the best TikTok dancer on her team, by the way, so check her out.

Q. I remember sitting next to Tammy Blackburn, and she was like, if she figures out how to block the ball and keep it in play, she is going to create a live ball turnover and USA is going to elevate. Have you learned that skill set, and what is it like playing with the person next to you?

RAYAH MARSHALL: Well, as far as like the shot blocking question, Coach B actually has challenged me to be a better shot blocker in the sense of keeping those possessions live, and I feel like that is something in the off-season I've challenged myself to adapt to, and I feel like I've gotten better.

Excited to test it out during this season on some opponents.

As far as JuJu, this is unreal. This is a clone, everyone. This girl right here? Oh, my gosh. I just feel like she has a lot of versatility to her game. It's very fun to play with her because the competitive spirit she brings, it's kind of like the energy carries over into my game. When I see her out there scoring back to back buckets and then she comes on the defensive end, she's locked in, she's like beyond winning the game, she's thinking how can I make my teammate better, she's like, how can I make this next offensive possession easier for the next person.

And for me that's a person that when I see them suit up, I want to go out there and give my all and just do whatever is necessary to win a basketball game with her. She's an amazing teammate.

Q. What's it like to hear that?

JUJU WATKINS: Man, Rayah is my dog, bro. We always grew up playing against each other and never with each other, so to be able to be in this space and have her as like a leader on the team and tell me -- give me advice and stuff like that, it helps a lot, and I'm just glad that I get to play with another dog here.

Yeah, she's a powerhouse. She brings a lot of energy, a lot of leadership, and I'm just glad to be a part of that.

Q. JuJu, the national spotlight is going to be pretty hot on the nation's No. 1 recruit, and you're getting a lot of attention. Have you factored that into how you're going to approach this season? Have you talked with Lindsay about it?

JUJU WATKINS: I think just always approaching the game with my style and my own goals. I feel like I don't worry too much about what other people think I should do or how they think I should approach the game. Just always thinking of my goals and how I plan to approach the game, but ultimately the team goal is to win, and that's what I'm focused on.

Q. Rayah, making the NCAA tournament last year when you saw the name, what did it mean to you and your teammates?

RAYAH MARSHALL: Oh, my gosh, the feeling was just like, I wouldn't even know how to put that into words. It just felt like something we had worked for. We watched it kind of unfold and come true.

It's something we also had envisioned for ourselves at the beginning of the season, and we followed Coach Lindsay's path and what she had set forth to do, and we watched our work, all the hard work come live for us, so it was a great

feeling. Oh, my gosh.

Q. JuJu, you've been able to be in so many rooms with so many great players at such a young age. Who has been your favorite person to just talk basketball with, and second, you kind of represent this new era of women's basketball. How does it feel to be so receptive, everyone so receptive to your game and so supportive of you instead of looking at it as a negative thing?

JUJU WATKINS: For the first question, I would say Tina Thompson has been like a major benefit to me like as far as knowledge in the game and stuff, and her coming from USC and having a great career, and just to have her give me advice is just insane.

My mom was her bigger fan, so to have her really care and have her as like a big sister, it's amazing. So she's helped me a lot.

Then for the second question, I'm just grateful, honestly, I'm blessed to be in this position that I am in this time and space in women's basketball. I'm super excited for what's to come for us in this game, and I love everybody who supports me. My goal is just to remain who I am, be authentic to the game, and bring what I bring to the game, every game, so yeah.

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