

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Kansas State vs USC

Friday, March 28, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

**Kansas State Wildcats**

**Jeff Mittie**

**Temira Poindexter**

**Serena Sundell**

**Ayoka Lee**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll go ahead and open it up to questions.

**Q. In Manhattan earlier this week, you talked about not looking in the rearview mirror, and, quote, it's on to the next one and the next opportunity. Now you're here in Spokane and the game against USC awaits. Can you give us a sense for the mindset of this team heading toward the showdown Saturday night?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, I think it's pretty good. I think it's exactly that. I mean, practices have been pretty solid, I think. Our preparation's been solid. I think they're asking the right questions, they're preparing the right way. So we've got a great opportunity in front of us and that's how our team's looking at it.

**Q. You talked to the players about enjoying moment. How exciting of a time is this being a head coach and have you taken a moment to grasp the accomplishment that you, your staff, and the team have made at this point?**

JEFF MITTIE: I think those are things for after the year. Bottom line, you get right back into the grind of it. It didn't take me too long, plane ride home, to turn to the next phase. Now, at that point we didn't have an opponent, right? But you're always evaluating what you didn't do well in the game you just played, you're always evaluating what you're going to need to do better, and we knew that we



weren't going to know our opponent for roughly 24 hours. But I don't think that changes.

We do a self-evaluation of each game every time we play. So that part doesn't change. Regardless of the pride you feel of the win, plane ride's a lot more fun, all right? As we talked about, the first 15, 20 minutes was great. Everybody then crashed after that. But my preparation began pretty much right after the game.

**Q. All year really USC plays so much through JuJu who obviously is not going to be able to play in these games. How does that impact the way you guys can prep, the film that you can watch of this team when their main player isn't going to be out there?**

JEFF MITTIE: There's not many clips out there with her not on the floor. That's been a real challenge. Yeah, there's maybe a hundred total. And they played so well without her. First off, you know, I would just say you feel bad for JuJu. I said this in our presser earlier in the week, just the sense that anytime there are injuries, and in our game, in women's basketball, there's more than we like, right? We dealt with it with Ayoka Lee and it's tough. It's tough.

In terms of our preparation, it's a challenge for us because there's going to be an element of the unknown. So we'll have to -- there may be in-game stuff that they're running more stuff, that they're running who they put in the activity. Obviously, Kiki had a terrific game and she can do a lot for 'em, so we feel like there may be some things that they do there. There may be some things that they do with their shooters differently. So we'll have to be prepared for all of that.

**Q. I talked to Serena earlier in the year, and she said it was crazy to her to be here because when she committed, she was worried that she wouldn't be able to play at this level. She thought maybe she should go to a Mid Major. For you, what has it been like watching her develop and have her at this moment?**

JEFF MITTIE: You know, that's been one of the things that we've been proud of, just our program in general, is the



development of players like Serena that maybe aren't the five star coming out, but my staff sees something in them, we see something that we can develop them in the weight room, develop them in their skill set. Serena is exactly the type of player that we've had a lot of success with, players that come every day, want to work, want to learn, want to get better.

Yeah, with a lot of pride, I watch her and her teammates be in this moment and know all the hard work that they put in to get here. So her in particular, she's had a great senior year. Her game has changed from the freshman year dramatically to being able to run the offense at that point and now we can run the offense through her at times, and we can run the offense to her. You saw that at the very end of Kentucky. We ran to her at the very end to send that thing to overtime, and that's a play that as a freshman, early sophomore year, probably doesn't make.

**Q. You had Ayoka back for a couple games. Do you feel like she's all the way back and how has it been reintegrating her after a couple months?**

JEFF MITTIE: It's a great question. I hear Yoky say she's a hundred percent and I think when she says that, she's talking mainly that she's playing pretty pain-free. I think her foul trouble occurred in the Kentucky game because it's hard to jump right back into the most competitive time of the year, so she was late on some plays. She was late on a rotation, late on a screen.

So it's been obviously great to integrate her back in because she does so many things for us. But we have seen her have a good week of practice again. She hasn't been limited at all in that, so my expectation -- she said this before the tournament, and she was right. We have not discussed a minute limitations. I'll do what I think all good coaches do. If she looks at me to come out, I'll ignore her, okay? So... (laughing). I'll try to turn and pretend to be talking to other people (smiling), and we'll go from there.

**Q. When Ayoka sort of battled foul trouble against Kentucky, Kennedy Taylor came in and hit seven free throws and had eight rebounds. What has she done to sort of embrace that role off the bench and what were some of the discussions throughout the year knowing that she would have to be ready if Yoky suffered some kind of injury?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, I think Kennedy's played very well. She's had a very good February and a very good early March and really played well. She was a big key in the Kentucky game because to that point of how many minutes Lee could play, there wasn't any restrictions, but you also don't want to stretch her, and then, obviously, the foul

trouble, and then to have a backup like Kennedy who is playing very well and giving us extra possessions, getting to the free-throw line, creating what we constantly talk about is that gravity in the paint has been huge for us.

**Q. Did Gap Goat make the trip and what has that tradition meant to your team?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yes, Gap Goat did make the trip. It's funny that you're bringing that up because I saw one of our managers grabbing him because I think they were about to put him underneath the storage, and they're like, No, no, he goes on the plane with everybody else, right? We had a little incident early in the year where it's Gap Goat 2. So did make the trip. I hope our defense makes the trip as well.

**Q. We've all seen the record with Ayoka in the lineup this season. Is there a confidence that with her out there, that you can beat anybody in the country?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, there's definitely a confidence there with her. She impacts both ends of the floor, and most people think of it, I think, offensively in the sense that they see her record of 61 points in a game, they see the efficiency numbers, but she's one of the best defensive communicators I've coached, she's one of the best rim protectors I've coached. She plays with a nastiness down low, a physicality that we've missed, we've missed.

As much as Kennedy has given us a lift, she doesn't have that shot-blocking ability, that maybe communication -- although Kennedy's pretty good, when I'm talking about an elite communicator back there, you go back to the first two games of Lee in this tournament, we thought Fairfield was -- boy, what a -- we thought it was a nightmare matchup for the game for her to come back because she's playing a five out, shoot the three, she's going to have to defend the three line. All of the above is stuff that we don't see a lot of in our league. We see more traditional post play. And then you go to Kentucky's great size.

So we do have a confidence with her out there, and we also have a confidence with her not in the game. And I think that's been a big difference in this team because when we hung in there in the second quarter at Kentucky, a lot of that had to do with what Kevin talked about earlier, was Kennedy Taylor coming off the bench. So there's a confidence both ways with our group that maybe we haven't had in the past.

**Q. First question, you said Gap Goat 2. Did something happen to the first one? Can you elaborate?**

JEFF MITTIE: Well, yeah, we don't know if it ran away. It



was left in a meeting room. We jokingly said, There's been no ransom notes. So we're not sure -- yeah, there's been all kind of fun stories behind that, right?

It's been a fun part. You know, if you haven't heard the whole story of that, Gabby Gregory who played for us a year ago, we were -- I was going to the team, and I'm a huge baseball fan. You know, opening day was yesterday. And baseball's kind of come up with the stuff when people hit home runs, different teams have the celebration stuff, and obviously, football many years ago the turnover chain and now I don't even know what they do on the sideline. Everybody's got crazy stuff, right?

So I went to Gabby and I said, Hey, if we wanted to come up with something -- because we've been doing a defensive drill all year long emphasizing three stops in a row. So the next day, you know, Gabby looked at -- the next day there's, I think -- thank goodness for Amazon because you can apparently get a stuffed goat in less than 12 hours, okay?

So this goat appears at practice, and then I'm talking to her, and I'm kind of laughing. I'm like, a goat? And then I turn, and I said, Oh, you probably better get it an Instagram page. Well, within the hour that thing had an Instagram page, and then all of a sudden it had a gold chain. So it's been kind of a fun thing for our fans. And now our fan base, I mean, they have got miniature goats. My granddaughters all have 'em. It's quite the phenomenon for -- yeah.

**Q. Obviously Kiki is a different kind of post, she can float out and do lot of things?**

JEFF MITTIE: You ain't kidding. Goat and then to one of the best players in the country, all right.

**Q. You said one of them was missing, so I was worried. So, with her, just what challenges does she bring and obviously she's going to play an even bigger role without JuJu, so what are you guys expecting there?**

JEFF MITTIE: Great player. A player that they can move all around the floor. She played so well the other night. And obviously that's not a surprise because of her ability. But they can post her up, they can move her on the perimeter, she can face up, I thought her face up game just continues to get better. Yeah, she's a mismatch problem in every area of the floor. I don't know that there's one -- we'll try to do our best to keep things really tough on her. Try to do our best to do that, but I don't know that there's one formula to be able to do that but a heck of a player.

**Q. On the topic of Kennedy, when you were recruiting her out of the portal what were some of the things that stood out that made you think that she would be a good fit and sort of all the different roles that she's been able to play for you guys?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, we had a real need for more depth at the center spot, but we also had a real need for -- we wanted, I wanted to improve our physicality behind Lee, I wanted to improve our offensive rebounding, and she had a real knack for it. And then the other thing that goes into the recruitment is a player that would accept her role, knowing that Lee was coming back. And Kennedy was the sixth Player of the Year in the Missouri Valley, and, you know, in our conversations she liked coming off the bench, she thought that that was a role that -- so you're not going to find that combination of fits very often. And so, yeah, she really -- and she had a, you know, she's a Kansas kid that had a desire to play close to home and close to her family. So there was a lot of things that we felt like were really good fits basketball-wise, but also her motivation to want to be there and want to thrive in the role that we had for her.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

JEFF MITTIE: All right. Thank you.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes, please.

**Q. Ayoka, what is the difficulty when going up against a big like Kiki? And just in terms of preparing for a team like USC when they don't have JuJu Watkins, what sort of difficulty is there in just trying to understand even what they bring to the table what they're going to do?**

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think -- yeah, Kiki's a great player. She will definitely be, like, a focus for our team, has been in our scout. Yeah, I think just, like, putting her in positions that she isn't comfortable with, not giving her, like, the looks that she wants. I think film is awesome, just because -- yeah, like, we can see what they're capable of. So I think just trusting the film, trusting our scout and our coaches and using that to prepare well.

**Q. Serena, it's been 23 years since K-State's advanced to the Sweet 16. Can you describe just what this means to you, the K-State women's basketball program, the fans, and the university?**

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I think it's just super special



for this group. I know none of us have advanced this far into the tournament, so we're just enjoying every little moment with each other and grateful to be here and excited that we've represented Kansas State well and excited to continue to play together, knowing that we have so many seniors and each game could be our last.

So it's super cool to make history for our school, and I know we all love Manhattan and love K-State, so it's been a really fun week back home too.

**Q. Ayoka, just to go off that, like, your career has been incredible in so many ways but also frustrating in a lot of ways. So to be here -- this will be your last year to be able to help your team get to the Sweet 16 for the first time in so long. What does that mean to you? And then if the other two of you could sort of speak to what that means to her legacy.**

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, it means a lot to finally just accomplish these big goals that we've had because, yeah, it has been frustrating in a lot of ways, so to finally see some things like come to fruition is just really exciting. And to get to experience these things with my teammates too is just memories that, yeah, I'll just cherish forever.

Coach Mittie always talks about not always realizing the full impact of what you're doing until five years down the road, so just remembering that and just, yeah, soaking it all in while we are here.

TEMIRA POINDEXTER: I feel like it speaks a lot to her character and who she is as a player and a person. She's been through a lot and she's sacrificed not just her body, but her time. She's been in college for a long time, so -- no, not like that, but... (laughing). And it just means a lot. To me, coming to K-State, I was so excited to be able to play with these two and it just means a lot. I'm so grateful and it's really a blessing.

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, I'm just happy for her. I've said it before, but I came in as a freshman only expecting to play with her for one year, so sitting here as a senior and being in the Sweet 16 is just a cool moment for us. But, yeah, she's been through so much and battled so much adversity and been in treatment for hours upon hours and has just worked her butt off her entire career. It's one of those things, too, where not everybody in her position is going to keep fighting. She could have easily hung up her shoes last year, but she decided to come back because this is where she wanted to be.

And even this year battling through one surgery and then another surgery and maybe going to make it back for March Madness tournament, she could have easily been

done, but she was like, nope, just put her head down and was like, I'm going to come back. It's not when you want it, but I'm going to be back on the court again. And she was very determined. So just to see that hard work, determination, all the things pay off, I'm just super happy for her.

**Q. Wanted to ask you guys, for whoever wanted to answer, how do you balance the emotions of being in a really hard-fought energetic game in round two, like that overtime game against Kentucky, and then kind of flipping the page and shifting your focus to this weekend.**

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, we definitely rode that high for a few days. I mean, we were excited, as we should be, I think. But then when we got back into practice, we had a team meeting on Tuesday morning, I think, once we hit that meeting and kind of put our eyes forward to the schedule and our opponents. That's when we kind of flipped the switch and we were like, okay, let's move on. That was fun, but there's still more to be accomplished.

**Q. For any of you, Sweet 16 is when you're on a neutral site for the first time. Is there anything that's really stood out about the experience, like the gear or anything that's come your way thus far?**

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think it's all pretty cool (laughing). Like, yeah, I think the whole experience, just because we've never been here and we know, yeah, like there's only 16 teams left playing in the NCAA tournament. Like, that's pretty cool that we're one of 'em.

So, yeah, I think we're definitely a grateful team, so I think we're just all soaking it all in. Yeah, I think everything's been great, so, yeah, we're enjoying it.

**Q. Serena and Temira, what kind of confidence does having Ayoka out there give you? Is there a belief that you can beat anyone in the country with her in the lineup?**

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, our team is -- I mean, we are super excited to have her back. We're simply a better team with her on the court and back at a hundred percent. I think we all are confident we can beat anybody in the country, but we also kind of have that underdog vibe around our team where not a lot of people are expecting, and I think as a player, you couldn't ask for anything better. Like, you don't have much to lose, but you also know that you're a very capable team, and you have confidence. So I'm excited to be able to play free and play together, so I think we're in a really good position.



TEMIRA POINDEXTER: Yes, I agree with Serena. Having Yoky back on the floor brings us a lot of confidence. I feel like you can -- or we can tell that immediately. Like, when her first practice back, I could tell the energy shift and just, like, the team, so it definitely means a lot to have her back.

**Q. For any of you, you guys look like you've had a lot of fun with Gap Goat. Just what does that tradition mean to your team and just your favorite part about that experience.**

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, he's been fun. He's been -- so he's our defensive representative, for anybody who doesn't know. The goal is to get three stops in a row, which is a gap, and then we have a Gap Goat, a large stuffed goat animal that our managers hold behind our bench and kind of rally for us.

So the goal is to get seven gaps in a game, and you have a 95-ish percent chance of winning, so it's a tangible thing that has just really taken off with our team and then our community in Manhattan and on social media. So it's been fun, but it's also been a really good thing for our defense and it's what makes our defense so tough. So, yeah, he's been a lot of fun, yeah.

TEMIRA POINDEXTER: Yeah, we work really hard to get it. We work on it in practice. So, yeah, it's a fun thing.

**Q. Ayoka, Coach earlier mentioned your value in terms of communication defensively on top of what everyone thinks of with your production, is that something that sort of came natural to you or something that you have worked on over the course of your career?**

AYOKA LEE: I think it's just something that I've had coaches who have, yeah, just pushed it a lot, like instilled that in me. I think Coach Mittie's done the same thing, and coaches that we've had at K-State. Especially, yeah, just because, like I'm in the middle of the floor on defense, so sometimes I have the best view of everything, so -- and it comes along with taking pride in our defense too. Like you have to communicate because it's a team defense. So, yeah, I think those things and it just, you just see how much more effective it is when we do communicate well, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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