

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: Texas vs UCLA

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Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Mortgage Matchup Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Gianna Kneepkens

Gabriela Jaquez

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference

UCLA 51, Texas 44

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UCLA.

At this time we'll hear an opening statement from Coach Close and follow with questions for our student-athletes.

CORI CLOSE: First of all, Texas has had a spectacular year. They put so much pressure on us. It definitely was not a pretty game. I wanted to apologize to all the fans for the rugby match and the 23 turnovers.

But I think credit to them, that they played that hard to force that kind of game. They have some just excellent players on their team. Lots of respect for the year that they had and how much challenge they provided.

I think we always say the tougher, more together team wins. I just thought we had to keep resetting, keep coming back to the right mental state of mind to what the next right step was. We obviously had a lot of disappointing things.

All year long people have been talking about our offense. We've been saying, no, it has to be our defense that has to be our anchor.

I think they had 21 more shots than we did on the goal. That's how good our defense was. We did it with toughness, togetherness and defense. It earned us another chance to go 1-0.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the



student-athletes.

Q. This is the first time UCLA has ever made the championship game. There's still one more to go.

CORI CLOSE: Since the NCAA. '78 and '79.

Q. Are you going to allow yourselves to soak it in, or is it on to the next?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, we were talking about it in the locker room. This is something that we've all dreamt of being in the position in. We're all very thankful. We expected to be here.

Tonight we'll all celebrate with our families and soak this in. Tomorrow we have to lock in and prep for another 1-0.

Yeah, we're definitely allowed to celebrate this. This is amazing. I'm so proud of this group.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, to add on to that, enjoy it with each other and enjoy that we have two more days with each other. I think that's what we're most excited about, just spending more time together, playing another game together.

But yeah, we keep saying the job's not finished. Still have one more game to win.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I mean, yeah, they said it all. But we were saying in the locker room we maxed out the amount of games we could have played together. We're grateful for that. Excited to have another opportunity to learn and grow from today, get another chance to play together.

Q. How special is it to make history in the program? How do you look to finish it off against South Carolina?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Give credit to the people that have walked before us, they have won championships. Obviously this will be the first time to compete for one in the NCAA era.



This is what we all came here to do. Just super proud of us to get us to the chance to have another opportunity to play for a national championship.

Q. As Coach said, it was quite a defensive game. Limiting Madison Booker to only three shots on 23 attempts.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I can say something.

First of all, she's an incredible player. I was teammates with her on USA. She's a great person. She's just one of the best players in college basketball. All the respect to her.

But Gabs and all my teammates that played on her, Angela played on her, all the scouts switched on to her, just did an incredible job pressing up, making those shots difficult.

She can hit those. I think we kind of pushed her ought a little bit farther and made those very difficult for her. So just proud of my teammates.

Q. When a double-digit lead whittles down to three with under 20 seconds to go, what were you saying to each other at that point?

LAUREN BETTS: We do so much mental work. I don't think a lot of people realize. We meet like once a week with Coach Tasha. We're constantly trying to improve our mental space and our mental toughness.

I think in those moments we're just so connected that regardless of what the score is, we could have been down 10, we still would have been as connected as if we were up 10.

I'm just really proud of this group. I think it shows the maturity. I know I can count on anybody on this team regardless of what the score is. We're going to continue to show up and compete.

Q. Gianna, a bounce-back game for you. How does it feel to have the sort of game? Were you feeling any kind of pressure going into this?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I wasn't really feeling pressure. Just my mindset going in is I wanted to be super aggressive on the defensive end. I think shots are going to go in, they're not going to go in sometimes. If you play with your mind like that, basketball is not so fun.

When you can focus on the things you can control, like boxing out, getting rebounds, just playing aggressive, I just

kind of had my mind there, then let the offense come. I knew my teammates to make plays, too. So just focusing on that.

Q. Lauren, the block against Madison, 20 seconds to go. Take me through what you were seeing in that moment. I saw you then gather your teammates, talk to them. What were you telling them at that moment?

LAUREN BETTS: Were they down in transition? Did we turn over the ball again (laughter)? It's fine.

Anyway, yeah, I mean, the entire game the coaches are just continuously telling me sprint back, sprint back, sprint back. My job today was help in any way I can inside the paint. That's my job consistently throughout the season. As soon as I saw her getting downhill, I'm like, all right, please block this, just don't let her score (smiling).

Like G said, she's an amazing player. I was in a good position. I trust my work and my defense.

Yeah, I mean, when we connected as a team, it was again reset. That's one play, we got to win this game. The buzzer has not gone off yet. Just continuing to stay poised and neutral throughout the game.

Q. Lauren, you got banged up a little bit early in the second half. Hit your head. How much did that hurt? You stayed in and persevered through it.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I'm not going to lie, it hurt. It hurt pretty bad (smiling).

But I feel like when you're in a situation, you're playing in the Final Four, your season's on the line, you've got to get over it and keep playing. There was no way I was coming out of the game.

Yeah, just sucked it up (laughter).

Q. You have had a couple of games where you had some slow starts. Tonight you came out pretty hard. How important was that to come out like that?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: It was huge. We have not loved our starts. We're aware of that. Coach always says awareness precedes behavior change, I think is the saying.

Just going in knowing we want to see, like, Bruin basketball all 40 minutes. That means we have to start when the clock hits one second. We really made that a focus. Now that we've shown ourselves that we can do it, we're going to continue to do it.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I think it started on the defensive end. I think once we get going and we have that aggressive mentality going on defense, I think it starts our offense.

We're always going to be able to score, something we're very capable of doing. When you start having that edge in your defense, it just brings so much more aggressiveness out. I'm just proud of the way we came out and executed.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, I think it starts with our preparation, the way we were speaking before the game, preparing for this game really well to come out ready to play.

Q. Lauren, this game wasn't just about winning. This entire Final Four run represents what this team is about. Can you explain something about this team that people may not see.

LAUREN BETTS: I think, like, what I love most about this team and why we got here is just, like, I am always going to say it, but the love that we have for each other truly drives us to just compete so hard. Like, we want this so bad for each other.

The way we come out, the way we prep, the way we practice, the way we work on defense, the way we go for steals, that's all because we just want to earn more days with each other. We want to make history. We want to do this for each other.

I mean, like, I think it's just our connectivity. That's why we've gotten this far. I'm just extremely proud of this group. Obviously the job's not finished.

Yeah, I mean, to earn a few more days, it's everything to us.

Q. I know you are a very player-led type of conversation. Who took over at halftime today? What did you say after being held to six points in the second quarter?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, I think we have really good halftime talks and communication. I think that we all come in, drink our water, take a second to ourselves, then we start communicating.

I think depending on the game, depending on who feels like they need to speak, they can speak. Lauren will speak. I definitely spoke a lot this game. Charlissee, as well. We all take our turns. I think that's what makes our team so special, is that everyone can lead in their own way. We all respond and listen to what they have to say,

apply it coming out in the next half.

Q. Lauren, how hard was it coping with all the turnovers building up for y'all? Was a big priority pushing Madison off her midrange spot?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, she's an amazing player. We just wanted to make it as tough as possible. Yeah, continue to push her out. I'm just so proud of her guards. She's not an easy person to defend. Everybody that got a chance to guard her did an amazing job. When you're so focused on the details of your defense, it makes a big difference. She controls her team and takes over the offense. That's a huge part of why we won today.

The turnovers? Yeah, I mean, obviously we don't want that to happen, but it did (smiling). You just got to move on. You can't really hang on to every single turnover that happens in the game. There are going to be so many mistakes made. If you told me right now, I couldn't think of a single one because we got the job done at the end of the day so it doesn't really matter to me at this point. We will do better next game (smiling).

Q. About halftime. Stylistically, what were some of the adjustments you knew you had to make at halftime?

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, yeah, getting the ball inside. I think that was our biggest message. Just not letting their pressure on the perimeter dictate how we run our offense. Just being a lot more photography.

They're an amazing defensive team, but we can't let that change the way we want to play and how we execute.

Q. You played in the Pacific time zone. Did you feel like you had almost like a home advantage in this? How being in the same routine affect you guys?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I can start, being from California and West Coast. I'm super grateful that the regionals were in Sacramento and people could make the drive up. Now it being in Arizona, people can make the drive over here.

We're really thankful we're on the West Coast. We do a lot of traveling during the regular season in the Big Ten. It can be tough at times. But to be on the West Coast really means a lot, especially to me and all of our teammates, just because we have so much family that can make it over here, a lot of fans that can make the drive. We just appreciate everyone that came out to support us.

Q. Can you speak on Lauren's impact on both ends of the floor. That's something that can't be overlooked. The defense has been mentioned, but on offense, 16

points on seven of 10 shooting.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, like, we could sit here all day and talk about Lauren's impact. I'll keep it short (smiling).

No, like just the way, like, the amount she draws in on offense helps us all, all the guards, 'cause you can go one on one, but I don't know. That's a choice if you want to make it. If they double, she'll kick it out because she's a great passer.

On defense I think she just is a threat inside. When people get down there, at least in practice when I get down there, I don't want to shoot layups. That's just huge, just her being there is a factor and makes you think about it.

But another thing that I think maybe gets overlooked 'cause it's not talked about, Lauren's leadership is huge for us. She's willing to say hard things to us. In player-led teams, you need that. Lauren's impact is huge on us.

Q. Lauren, your team lost in the Final Four to UConn last year. Your team defeated Texas tonight and will play against South Carolina in the national championship Sunday. How did the loss of last year's semifinal motivate your team this year?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think last year we took that loss really hard. I think it made us think a lot about what we could have done better, not just in practice but as a team, leadership, being able to have tough conversations.

I'm just really proud of the growth and the way that we've held such a high standard consistently this year. Coach Cori has done a really good job throughout the season holding us to a high standard every day and not letting up on that.

The way we've competed every single day in practice has gotten us to where we want to be today.

Yeah, I mean, for us leaders, we just wanted to make sure we do a good job of representing how we want this season to go. Yeah, I mean, I think it was just the standard that was held, yeah.

Q. Gabriela, when you were a freshman, started the season 7-0, then played South Carolina. What do you remember about that time in your career, that game? What would that Gabs think of you right now?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: It's kind of full circle playing South Carolina in the national championship game. I remember my freshman year going to South Carolina and playing

them. Tough matchup. Their fans, it was like a lot of people. Being a freshman, Aliyah Boston was there. Yeah, crazy.

We played 'em again right in the Sweet 16. We've seen them a couple times. Just super excited to go up against them this time. Obviously they played us at home. We've matched up against them quite a lot.

I'm just so proud of our team. Again, we keep saying it, but I think it's so true to what we believe, having more days with each other, another day to prepare, another day to play a game that we all love, and we love doing it together.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you for your time.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Close.

Q. Ann Meyers Drysdale was in the crowd. She was on that UCLA team back in 1978.

CORI CLOSE: As well as Denise Curry, Debbie Willie Haliday. There were several people in the stands from that team. So go ahead.

Q. With that record that you're on now of 29 wins, how significant is it to do this in front of them, make history again possibly?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I love what Gabs said. We just always want to give them their due because they set a standard that was so high. It's not their fault that it was AIAW at that time. They won a national championship. They went to back-to-back Final Fours. We always want to acknowledge that.

For me, since the day I got there, they are season ticketholders. I get texts from them all the time. There's nobody that supports the mission of our program. We do things a little differently. They have been behind me every step of the way. It is really meaningful to have so many people from that particular team that set such an important course for UCLA women's basketball to be so supportive of our women.

They feel that. I'm very humbled and grateful for their investment, engagement and support.

Q. What does it mean to you to get to this national championship game for the first time in the NCAA for UCLA? Playing South Carolina on Sunday, what that matchup will be.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, we've played each other every year I think over the past several years. Dawn does such a great

job. I mean, she's a standard bearer in our sport.

I'm thankful for what they have done not just for South Carolina but for the game. But we also are an incredibly competitive, confident group. I'm sure they are, as well.

All you can ask for is an opportunity to play your best basketball for a national championship. Really excited about that opportunity.

In terms of what it means to me, it's just everything to listen to them. It's just everything for me to be a fly on the wall and to watch incredible young women chase their dreams, grow together, sacrifice, grow in character, grow in competency, grow in mastering their craft.

Really it's just such a joy to serve their growth process. I just feel humbled to be a part.

Q. Specifically about Lauren, in a game where mistakes and missed shots were the norm, to have a performance like that, what is it about her that allows her to be that player who does not make mistakes? I would love your thoughts that Madison Booker was moving towards the rim, she's blocking the shot.

CORI CLOSE: Her ability on defense. People have asked me, Do you think she's mobile enough?

I'm like, Well, question answered.

Watch her move her feet. Watch her when we can switch with her.

When that play happened, I really have so much confidence that every time she is in a matchup, she's going to find a way to alter, block, scare somebody from doing that. I just think she's spectacular.

The biggest compliment you can give Lauren was the way Texas felt like they had to play our guards because that was the only way we weren't going to be able to get inside touches, not just for Lauren, but for Angela, too, for Sienna when she came in. We really want to play through the paint and play from the inside-out.

The biggest compliment you can give Lauren is how Texas had to play guards to limit their touches.

Q. You knew of Kneepkens and Charlisse from the Pac-12 days. You knew what you were getting with them. How has their game evolved and developed at UCLA?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I remember my conversation with

Gianna when she entered the portal. One of the things she talked about is that she wanted to join a group of women that she was challenged. She wasn't the hardest worker on the team. She wasn't the only one being the gym before and after. She's a tireless worker.

I told her, If you come to UCLA, you will be one of 12 that work that way.

She almost didn't believe me. Then I remember into the summer. She came to me, was like, Wow, you're not kidding. Every day someone else is beating me to the gym. I don't think that's ever happened to her before.

Charlisse was one of my favorite guards. She actually beat us in the championship game of the Pac-12 tournament one year. I mean, she's just spectacular. She is one of the best processing point guards I've been around. Her leadership is unmatched. She just has done such a great job of having a pulse of the team.

Everybody can connect with Charlisse. It's what she's done for us from a leadership perspective, then how she processes the game with the ball in her hands, but maybe even more away from the ball, both defensively and offensively. She just has such a high basketball IQ.

It was really about the perfect fit to increase the productivity and efficiency of our collective puzzle. They have exceeded my expectations in terms of what we were getting. I couldn't be more thankful and thrilled to have them both.

Q. You mentioned people talk about your offense. Did you expect it to be this type of defensive battle?

CORI CLOSE: No.

Q. When it is, what do you have to do in terms of adjustments, knowing what it's going to be like for the flow of the game?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I mean, there wasn't any flow of the game. It was sort of a hard game to coach because I didn't feel like you can move the pieces around or go this is a matchup we can really take advantage of. It just was could we get enough passes and could we play through the middle of the floor to get some sort of clean catch.

Quite frankly, we didn't play to our best offensively. I remember after the Iowa game when we won the Big Ten championship tournament, I told our team that you cannot fall in love with pretty offense and think that it's going to be like this every game.

I told them there's going to be a game in the NCAA tournament that you're going to have to just grind it out and do it with your defense. Enjoy this game, but don't hang your hat on that end of the floor.

This was the game we needed that. I want to grow the game so bad, I felt guilty walking off the floor because it was not pretty in any way, shape or form.

But the reality is, too, it's really all about toughness at this point and finding a way to make a winning play, even if it's a winning play you wouldn't have predicted or chosen.

Q. The way you've built this program has always been consistent with your vision. How does it feel to know that you've been building up to this moment and you get to coach in the last women's college basketball game this season?

CORI CLOSE: Spectacular. I remember when I was being mentored by Coach John Wooden, one of the things he gave me was a sense that you could compete at the highest levels, you could master your craft, you could do it in a transformational, character-building way. I was almost losing hope that that was possible. Then Coach Wooden was like, No, it can be done and you have to value certain things.

The biggest way I could pay forward what he invested in me is to prove to other people, maybe I could maybe, just maybe, I could encourage one other coach that you can do it in an uncommon, transformational way, that coaches people's hearts first and from the inside-out. It doesn't make you less competitive.

You see it. Their love for each other and their connectivity of how they've grown as young women is what makes them fight so hard to compete another day. I want to encourage maybe a couple other coaches that you can do it that way. We don't have to say, oh, it's transfer portal, NIL, we can't do it that way.

You can. You can. You have to stay principled-centered. That's the way I hope, humbly, to pay forward what Coach Wooden gave the example to me.

Q. Texas led for all of 54 seconds today, but cut the deficit. What did it take from a coaching and player perspective for your team to maintain the lead? What did it show you about Texas and the game at hand?

CORI CLOSE: Well, Texas is an elite program. What does Coach Vic Schaefer say? Texas tough? They're a tough basketball team. I got to give them their flowers in that. We never thought they were going to go away.

I think basketball is a game of runs, things happen. Especially with a team that plays that aggressively on the defensive end. They hope to just wear you down.

I do think a big piece of it was free throws. When we did get to the free-throw line, I think we were 11 for 12. Those kinds of persevering plays, when they are going to play that aggressive, you do get a chance to get to the free throw, you better knock it down.

All the credit to them, they were constantly aggressive, they were relentless. I think they always believed they'd make a run. We have a lot of respect for who they are. They've earned that in the landscape.

But I did think we were really connected and we really believed in our anchor. We just kept asking ourselves what is our next right step.

Q. The mental toughness, you hold them to six points in the first, they hold you to six points in the second. Controlling defense, offense is going to hell, can you always control the defense.

CORI CLOSE: And it was right there.

Q. In the third quarter, both teams scored 11 points. You said everybody talks at halftime. Is it just seeing that first shot go in, just to keep the offense going?

CORI CLOSE: I think it was it's not even -- it was getting a quality shot. It wasn't really whether you were making it. We were having trouble earning quality shots.

There just was no flow in that. I have great coaching staff. Each staff member who has a scout, today it was Tony Noonan, there's only three possessions where I thought we got in rhythm clean shots, that teamwork kind of rhythm. That was the hard part is that it wasn't a matter of making shots, it was about earning quality teamwork shots. We just really struggled with that.

Their pressure really got the best of us in that way. I think every game you have to go back and go, Okay, what did that one teach us? What adjustments do we need to make? If I'm South Carolina, I would imagine we're going to see a lot of pressure. How do we in a quick turnaround, really attack this film and have a growth mindset and see if we can come back and earn that.

I just didn't think it was seeing the ball go in. It was about what we could earn together. I did see it in their eyes when they could get a clean look together that they created out of connective teamwork, it was like, Okay, we can do

that.

I thought it was really key down the stretch, in the fourth quarter we got Lauren the most amount of touches. I thought that was the difference of us coming out on top, getting high-percentage shots.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

CORI CLOSE: Thank you all for being here. Really appreciate your coverage of our sport.

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