

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UCLA vs South Carolina

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Mortgage Matchup Center

UCLA Bruins Coach Cori Close

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with questions for Coach Close.

Q. We've been hearing all season long, Coach T, Coach T, Coach T, the mental conditioning. Can you take us through her impact. I know you've had a psychologist work with the team before. How has she impacted the team? What is it about her that makes her such a valuable mentor?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, Coach Tasha, I worked with her when I was at UC Santa Barbara, too. She's always been a brilliant teacher. She has a gift to connect and she just is a phenomenal teacher.

We had several through the times -- Joshua Medcalf, who is flying in for the game, he was for the first seven years our director of mental conditioning. Then we had Collin Henderson, Trevor Moawad. We've had various people contribute in that.

Through that period of time, Tasha was learning from them. She really had a passion for it. She was just taking copious notes, doing all this off-season reading.

Then we get to a point where the players were, like, We want Coach T to take this on. The reason they said it, they loved everybody that had taught us, but they said Coach T is so passionate about it and she's here every day.

That was a really turning point. It really came from the players' request, that they thought that was the best way to go. They really noticed that she had really mastered her craft in that way.

Q. Your players and South Carolina say they've seen a lot of progress since 2021 in terms of treatment at the tournament, things that were lagging four years ago.

Do you see that? What do you attribute that to? How do you think Phoenix is doing?

CORI CLOSE: I'm thrilled. Obviously we need more West Coast cities, not just talking about because I'm a West Coast school, because of the good of the game. We need to have exposure of our great game into a variety of West Coast cities. I think that just brings parity. It grows the enthusiasm of the game. TV viewership, all those connecting points. I'm thrilled Phoenix has done this. I think they've done a great job.

It's interesting, Dawn and I both worked during the time after the bubble when the gender equity things came to a head, her and I were on a call every week together trying to attack some of these things together.

Coach Auriemma actually was on that call as well. Tara VanDerveer was on that call. I don't know why I was on the call, but they just let me (smiling).

To work together and to see some of this progress, obviously what they've done at South Carolina in terms of attendance, in terms of capturing the hearts of their community, has just been unmatched. They're a standard bearer in that way.

We really have wanted to be that kind of program on the West Coast. But you need the standards of the championships to reflect what we're all trying to do on our individual campuses. It's been really rewarding to actually partner with Dawn to help that grow. I think she's been spectacular at it.

Q. We've talked all season about how Lauren has gotten better at reading the defense, being able to pass. What have you seen from the rest of the group as far as how they've continued to learn how to pick their spots?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think Lauren would be the first to say that that's the biggest difference from last year to this year, is that everybody's understanding how they can contribute. We're not all just standing around staring at Lauren.



I think we didn't do that as well offensively in our semifinal game against Texas, but over the course of the season that's been a real intentional area of focus, is that everybody understands sort of what their value-add is. We want them to feel confident to hunt for that, at the same time understanding that really it's about playing through the paint, not just playing through Lauren, having that attack mindset.

That's been one of the things that's been really fun for me watch grow, is all the other people understanding how much value they add, whether it be defensively or offensively.

They have their own things to be really proud of.

Q. Dawn is very complimentary of what you've done. I asked her about her first time in the championship game in 2017. She said the biggest thing, she exhaled after getting there, and then went on to win it, in hopes you don't have the same success in your first one. What have you been able to do in the last 20 hours to get ready? Are you expecting another rugby match tomorrow or...

CORI CLOSE: I really hope we have a more aesthetically pleasing game. Actually Joshua Medcalf, who I referred to earlier, texted me last night and said, I never thought I'd say that the NBA games that I'm watching are called tighter than the semifinals of women's college basketball.

It's not an easy job. I don't at all claim to say that I know the solutions. I do think we all want the same thing. The officiating, the coaches, the players, we all want the same thing. We want to have a stylistic game that shows off the progress of the game, that continues to grow the game nationally to people who are tuning in. We just have to figure out where that gap is and how we can close it.

I think the last 20 hours is a matter of just non-stop prep. I mean, both programs have so much respect for each other. We've played each other the last two out of three years. It's who can be their best when their best is needed. Who can execute to their identity on a more consistent basis.

We've been very businesslike. We were not jumping around in the locker room. We were not celebrating. We have really come to this tournament very focused. We really believe that the job wasn't done yet. We want to have a chance to compete for a national championship. We want to do that the highest of levels.

I definitely don't think there was a sigh of like, Oh, thank

goodness we made that next step. We want to compete to win.

Q. This is your first national championship game appearance. Last year was the first Final Four. Is there more pressure involved with a first Final Four as the No. 1 overall seed or first national championship game appearance?

CORI CLOSE: I definitely think last year felt like... We were reacting to everything, not anticipating. Whereas now that we have been a part of this, it just was a totally different planning experience. I just felt like we were able to be more strategic in how we put our players in positioning to be successful. They were able to anticipate, Okay, I heard the returner saying now this is going to be a long day, this is what you have to bring, this is what you have to do.

You just think that makes all the difference in the world.

Q. You had mentioned about your standard. The standard right now is two women coaches are playing in the championship game. Not to make this a battle of the sexes, but they did beat two men coaches.

CORI CLOSE: You said it, not me (smiling).

Q. How has that grown as far as women head coaches in this game? What do you think that narrative will be coming out of this Final Four?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I mean, first of all, we love great basketball. Give Coach Auriemma and Coach Vic Schaefer their kudos in what they have done to set bars of excellence in the game.

That being said, I think both Dawn and I feel a sense of pride that we are able to continue to represent women that can coach at the highest levels, to promote our game. I think both Dawn and I really see this as something bigger than ourselves. That's an honor. That's an honor to be a part of that.

Part of legacy, I don't want to speak for her, but I do think she feels the same way, we really want to have made an impact on growing the game for a long time to come, to inspire that women can stay in this game, that we don't lose women coaches. We need to promote more women at the grassroots levels to be coaching, getting involved in new sports. There's just a lot of things that go into that.

I think there's something to be said that if you can see it, you think you can achieve it, right? I think it's an honor to be a small part of that.



Q. Coach Staley talked earlier about the importance of Raven Johnson who has been in her program all five years. You have a couple players, Gabriela and Kiki, who have spent their entire college career with you. Can you talk to the importance of their growth and your program.

CORI CLOSE: They're the hub of the wheel. From when Gabs made it very clear that I think she was eight years old, she wrote on that piece of paper she was going to go to UCLA someday, she has played with that kind of gratitude and passion for all four years.

And Kiki Rice at that time was the highest ranked player we had ever signed. For her to have the belief that we could do something really special, then to have the fortitude to stick with it all the way through.

The real powerful thing is so many of our players that came after came because Kiki Rice was here. They wanted to play with her.

Both of them deserve so much credit for the position that we're in. I am so grateful to them. Commitment is a really hard thing. We have a phrase actually that Coach Shannon, when she was here, she said, It is your commitments, not your feelings, that will determine your destiny.

That is very true for Kiki Rice and Gabriela Jaquez. Their commitment led them to this point. I am so thankful for those.

Q. Looking back to last year when you were in this spot, how do you feel you've kind of grown as a coach?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think there's a lot. I think every time you hit a roadblock or a failure sometime where you felt like you weren't your best version of yourself, you have to do a bunch of things.

You have to ask truth tellers in your leadership life to go, Hey, what do you see here? What are my blind spots? Where do we fall short?

Then I have a responsibility to make strategic changes that reflect that I really heard those things or saw those things.

There's tactical things. There's leadership things. There's how we structured our practices, things that we needed to address.

So I just hope that every year, whether it's getting

embarrassed at a Final Four or whatever. I mean, I had a situation at the beginning of this tournament that I had to go to a player and ask for their forgiveness. I screwed up. I just think that's how you grow as a leader, how you earn credibility with your players, is you don't think you have it all together all the time.

I think when you're able to do that, you actually experience the most growth. So it's never fun in the moment. It sure wasn't fun to be exposed in some of the ways that we were exposed, and I'm ultimately responsible. But I am thankful for the growth that has stemmed from that.

Q. You always talk about the women that have built this program that have come before you. Have you thought about your place in the history of UCLA women's basketball?

CORI CLOSE: Not for a second. Really, it just is not my why. It's not my purpose. Where I get my joy is watching the players do things that hopefully you're a part of something that maybe they couldn't have done on their own, you got to facilitate that.

Honestly, I coach for purpose and for an audience of one.

Q. Women's sports is often lost to history or completely ignored. You've talked about that AIAW team. Your thoughts on the fact that you just being here kind of sheds a light on that team that maybe wouldn't be there?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think that's been really fun. I was listening to Gabriela talk about them. I think it was last night. I can't remember when. Sometime. I thought it's really cool. She gets it. Every time we get said at the first and the only, and we don't say anything to correct that, it's sort of like this jab at that team. So it's an opportunity for us to bring that light to them and to say we see you, we see you, we appreciate you. You're a part of why we're here.

Several of the women on that team are here in the building, they're season ticketholders of ours. It's a hard situation because there's semantics of what was the NCAA acknowledges as the NCAA era. I just don't want it to diminish what they did. I want them to always feel that we acknowledge them, we see them, and we honor them.

Q. Two situations that sort of I feel like were defining in your program over the last few years. One is 2022 as a tough years, but you made that decision to go ahead and play in the WNIT. Angela might be your only player still with you. But making that decision to play that game. Then that tough loss to USC in 2024 in



double overtime. Lauren said that game helped in terms of end-of-game strategy, that they've carried that with them.

CORI CLOSE: I think you have to learn how to win. Each group is a little bit different. I remember even back before that, I don't know, the years are running together a little bit, but when Jordin Canada's first year, that was the number one recruiting class, I had way overscheduled. We played in the WNIT at that time. I thought it was very instrumental in building our toughness and learning how to win, those are just steps, and then same in the one you referred to.

I just think every situation is you got to learn what is my responsibility of placing the brick that we have in the perfect position. We're not just trying to build a wall. We're trying to place the brick that we have in the present moment in the best possible way we can.

I think participating in that tournament was part of learning how to place that brick for that season of our development in the right place. That's been really, really huge.

I have always thought we were pretty intentional and good in special situations or in-game situations. That year we failed. We lost three games in end-game situations that I have to take responsibility for as a coach. I did not do a good enough job putting them in positions to be successful.

That off-season we made a real commitment to them that we were going to be better for them, we were going to be really intentional about how we went about things. We do special situations in our practices pretty much 15 minutes every single day ever since then. I think our players have a new level of confidence in that area.

Like most things in life, when you get exposed, when you have to do things, you have to respond. It forces you to grow in a way you might not have otherwise.

Q. Talking about your competition against South Carolina recently, what do you recall most about the last time you played? What was so successful for you in those games?

CORI CLOSE: It was one of those games at home that we were really clicking on both sides of the ball.

I think really it starts with, and we had a great game Kiki's freshman year at South Carolina, came down to the wire. We ended up losing that game. It was really a great game.

I think that both teams, what I remember is the team that rebounds the best and defends the best down the stretch won both those games. I've been on both sides of that.

I don't think it's probably going to be that different. I think it's going to be a possession game. Now, that wasn't the case against Texas. But that's how good our defense was, because they still got 21 more shots on the goal than we did. I don't think that we'll be able to do that against South Carolina. If they get that many more shots on the goal either because of rebounds or the turnover battle, that we'll be able to do that.

In both situations the way I remember it is the team that was able to dictate with their defense, get enough stops, win the rebounding battle, came out on top.

Q. We've all seen the growth. What will you say the keys to the physical and mental preparations have been for your team to be ready for this moment? What will you cherish more about your time with this group?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that one of the things that I never have had to coach this group's work ethic. I actually have to kick 'em out. Hey, there is no skill workouts today. They will want those one-on-one things every single day if they could.

I think the mental probably at this point is more important than the physical. But leading up, it all has to be there, right? You have to have this really strong foundation of who you are physically, who you are tactically, who you are mentally and emotionally, your connectivity.

I think this is the culmination, right? It's sort of the by-product of all the work that has gone into that. I can't speak for South Carolina, but it is really important that we recover well, that we do as little on our feet as we can today. Recovery is everything. Most of the work is going to be mental at this point.

Q. You spoke all season about the way the team has had a growth mindset. At this point in the season, with the final game of the season tomorrow, no matter what, is there still room for growth or is it more about execution?

CORI CLOSE: Both. I think you have to. You have to let each experience, each scouting report, each interaction teach you. That's how we built it, is just a choice to intentionally grow every single time, every single timeout, every single opportunity. It's one of our core values.

I don't think that ever stops. And we have to execute. We have to execute at a really high level.

I think every game is going to present adversity and opportunities to pivot. We decided to change how we

played ball screen coverage in a way that we didn't prepare for at all in the second half, in the fourth quarter of that game, when they were bringing their five up to go and ball screen action with Rori Harmon. The game required us to make a pivot, to change strategies.

I just think there has to be a balance of both: how are we growing, how are we adjusting, how do we strategize to have the best execution we possibly can.

Q. When you think of UCLA, you think of success in basketball. We were just talking about the 1978 team. 1995 is the last time the men won. What would this mean to be able to bring this championship back to the fan base? How great has it been having Ann Meyers Drysdale as a presence with this team?

CORI CLOSE: It's been spectacular to have Annie. I got a text from her last night. She has been there for us and with us since I got there. I've known Annie a long time. She's never wavered in terms of what she's been to me, as a young coach all the way through to my being a head coach at UCLA. I am just so grateful for that.

I think what you said about bringing it back to the fan base, to really share it with the UCLA village that has supported us at every turn, that is probably the most meaningful part for me, is that to be able to contribute...

You guys have heard me say several times that banners hang in gyms and rings collect dust, but who you become and who you impact you get to keep forever.

I want to stay focused on that. I want to stay a coach focused on things that last.

That being said, to have that opportunity would be really spectacular because it gives me the opportunity to thank and connect to the UCLA village that has buoyed us, helped us, supported us, been incredibly enthusiastic supporters, the chance to connect that with them would be an honor.

Q. Drawing on situations and experiences is obviously huge. I say that because obviously both teams, it's the timeline, quick turnaround. How big is it drawing on obviously like experience like playing in the Big Ten tournament, going through end-game situations, whatever? What is the biggest challenge in having a good scout and knowing a lot of it will come into end-game adjustments?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think you've got to be your best on all facets. They know us really well. We know them really well. It's going to be about players making plays. You

have to have players that are willing to recognize and seize the opportunity to make a winning play that's probably not going to be on the scouting report.

I think you try to provide the best structure and game plan you possibly can, and then you have to be just trusting of them. I want our team to feel empowered. I don't want them to think it has to come from them. I want to have their backs at the same time. That's the fine line you're trying to find.

I do believe guard play is everything in these kind of games. We've got great guards. They've got great guards. It's going to be a matter of who executes their game plan and plays to their identity a little bit better.

Q. How does a head coach teach themselves and their staff to protect your own mental health and the wellness of your family as you navigate the rigors of the tournament and all of the sacrifices your family has to make?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I'm so glad you brought that up.

I am so grateful to the families of our staff members and coaches. They sacrifice a lot. I think we try to be really intentional about rest, really intentional about including families. It's not an easy profession to balance those things.

I don't even think it's a work-life balance. I don't subscribe to that. I think it's how do you have healthy integration, who you want to be as a family member and who you want to be in your profession. How do I facilitate an environment whether it's not either on the road. How do we create that their families feel a part of it.

My parents were a great example of this when I was growing up. My dad was involved in an organization called Young Life. He would do it on his own for a while after he was teaching. He was a high school teacher as well.

When he first did it, I still remember this, as a kid I wouldn't say totally resentful, but it was really hard because he got to go out of and do Young Life, and my mom was stuck with the burden of what was not happening at home because he was doing that.

Eventually my mom is like, You know what, I'm going to do it with him. We're going to take our whole family and do this. Then it was a situation of integration, it was something that we shared. Was it hard work? Absolutely. Were there sacrifices? For sure. But it was something that we really enjoyed sharing together as a family.

I think I try imperfectly to try to think that same way for our staffs. Even though I don't have a family of my own, I really value that. I don't want our staff members to have to choose. I'm constantly saying, Hey, how can you help you with that? How can I be better as a leader in that? I've seen it go wrong far too often.

Q. You've been very complimentary of Dawn and her program. What has most impressed you in her tenure in South Carolina, get her teams in this position consistently?

CORI CLOSE: I think what impresses me most about what Dawn's done is obviously her sustained level of excellence on the court is just undeniable. She's been a standard bearer. I think I saw Holly Rowe talking about her and Geno being the ones that pretty much hold the beacon of where our sport is being, has gone recently.

That's true. She's earned that.

But I think the other part that I respect so much about Dawn is how much she cares for the people around her. I am really grateful for that because actually someone I'm really close to is on our staff right now, Wendale Farrow. I've seen it firsthand. I care deeply. My mom teases us because he spends Christmas with me every year. My mom's like, I couldn't get a word in edgewise. All you guys were doing is talking about basketball the whole day.

He has come back. You're on the outside, and you think you admire that. But when he comes and says, Dawn is just amazing in how she cares for people, how she cares for the entire community. He was telling me stories about different things she has sacrificially done for different groups of people that aren't even in their program, but outside of that. She's just really used her platform to be a lifestyle giver. To me that's really a spectacular combination, to have that level of sustained excellence and make a difference in so many people's lives, then you're doing things the right way.

Q. Obviously you're focused on your own game last night. I don't know if you had a chance to see what transpired at the end of the UConn-South Carolina game. Have you reached out to Dawn at all?

CORI CLOSE: We texted a little bit last night, but very briefly. I told her in a couple weeks I'd love to know the real story.

Those are two people, honestly, both Coach Auriemma and Dawn Staley, that have invested in me. I have had opportunities to grow in this profession because of the both of them.

I'm going to let that be between them. But I will just say that this is a really competitive environment. Emotions are incredibly high. This is a culminating event. I know them to be really good people. So I'm going to trust that when all the dust settles that we just come back to that.

Q. (Indiscernible) could you have imagined when you kind of reached out to him and shocked him with the video proposal that you'd be coaching against him in the NCAA tournament?

CORI CLOSE: No. I was watching him in Sacramento because he's from Sacramento. He had 62 people come to be a part of his experience there. Then to be able to go to a Final Four, I'm really excited for him until tomorrow.

But honestly he applied to be our administrative assistant back in I think it was 2012. We ended up going, You don't fit there, but you might be really good here.

Changed some of the way we do things. The way we run our scout team is because of the way he transformed it. The way we do certain things in terms of connecting with our players and celebrating some things is because of his stamp on our program.

I love who he is. I love the way he knows how to connect and support diverse groups of people in such an incredibly genuine way. I feel very lucky to be a part of his life.

But I'm thrilled for him until tomorrow (smiling).

Q. With the current landscape of college athletics, how prominent the transfer portal is, what are some of the challenges that come with building continuity on a year-to-year basis?

CORI CLOSE: Great question. I'm in the midst of it. I have several transfers on my team now, but I'm also going to lose six seniors. We're going to be very proactive in the transfer portal. We're probably going to sign five transfers.

I think you have to be a really good relationship builder and culture builder if you're going to have continuity within this environment. You have to be incredibly intentional about that. What does that look like all the way from the summer, all the way through. I think it has to be more chemistry on how you read screens.

I don't think you can have a committed team unless you have a connected team. Really building that with a new group of people has to be really well-planned out. But I don't think it can't be done. I think it really can.

I would say that probably one of the biggest connectors on our team is Charlisse Leger-Walker. She's only been here two years. If you asked every player about who's one of the biggest people who has brought us to be a whole and not just individual parts, they would say her.

I think you can do it if everybody's aligned in the vision and they're willing to be known. That's hard. I mean, to be courageously vulnerable with each other, to grow, to sacrifice individually for something you want collectively, you have to have the right people on your bus. But I do think it can be done.

Q. Your team is playing South Carolina for the title, aiming to win for the first time in the program's history. South Carolina's defense played aggressively and held UConn to just nine points in the fourth quarter yesterday. When you watch South Carolina on film, what do you notice about their style of play? How do you prepare your team for the biggest game of the season?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, great question. I actually was saying to our staff yesterday before the game that I thought UConn could struggle with South Carolina's length, the way in which they can keep you from playing north and south. They really made them go side to side, didn't get a lot of paint productivity, didn't let them get three-point shots off because they're so long, versatile, they can switch so many screens.

I think that's the key, is how do you move the angles, how do you use screening actions, how do you make it so that it's not just a one-on-one long athletic battle because they are that. They are so good on so many fronts.

How do you change their angles and really still play through the paint, given that they are really good at what they do.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time today.

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely. Thank you, guys. Appreciate you.

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