

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

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Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Mortgage Matchup Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Gabriela Jaquez

Kiki Rice

Lauren Betts

Finals Postgame Media Conference

UCLA 79, South Carolina 51

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the national champions, UCLA.

We'll do an opening statement from Coach.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it's hard to even know what to say. First of all, thank you to all of you for partnering with us for this amazing game.

I remember my dad used to say, he knew I loved to compete. He goes, If you can take something that you love and continue to compete and impact people's hearts in the process, you found a good thing.

This has been a calling, not a job. I've been saying it all day, but I don't even know how else to say it, it's immeasurably more than I could ask or imagine. I'm really grateful.

It's not about me. It's about watching these incredible young women be dream chasers, to watch them grow in ways that they will remember and it will stick with them for the rest of their lives.

It's about their work and their habits yielding. We say this, we want to recruit courageous -- gets me choked up. There were a lot of times we wondered if it could be true. I said I wanted to find uncommon, courageous women that were willing to make uncommon choices that maybe possibly could yield an uncommon result, and today it did



(tearing up).

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Can you talk about today, your drive? Can each of you share something that you're going to take from Coach Close that you're going to miss about her.

KIKI RICE: Today was just a fantastic display of our resilience, intensity that we came out. Just our will to win. We knew, we had a feeling this was our time, this was our year.

We came out there this entire weekend, and we would not be denied.

Let's see. A moment that I take from Coach Cori. Probably just there in the locker room. She was dancing. She was doing some good moves (laughter).

No, so grateful for her for all these four years, the incredible times and lessons from coach Cori.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, like Ki said, the confidence we came out with, we just knew we were going to win because of all the prep and work that we put in.

I think when we find a way to play together and play selflessly, do what we do, no one can stop us. You guys saw that.

Man, I think I'm going to miss our bickering in practice. I'm going to miss that (laughter). No, I think I'm going to miss, like, man, I think the way she consistently believes in me, what I'm capable of. To have, like, someone who is able to push you while also just giving you so much confidence every single day, that's something really special. I'm going to miss that a lot.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, they touched on it obviously. Our mentality coming out, we all just decided. I think that's what made us so powerful this whole season. When we decided we wanted to do something, we did it.

Coach Cori, I'm super proud of her as well, the way she

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responded as a leader last year. We responded well. Obviously we're here now. I think it started with Coach Cori and the way she wanted to make a change in our program and get us back here, get this result.

I'll always be thankful for her and believing in me. I just appreciate you.

Q. Lauren, we all see how much joy you play with, you work with, the dance teams, things like that. To deliver a game like that in what is for any player a high-pressure moment but keep the joy, what does it mean to you?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I think that's why we're able to show up and do what we do all the time. You can still show up and do your job and be serious and compete, but there is like a long journey that we've been on together. I think you can find the fun in all of it.

What an amazing way to finish off the season with a national championship, knowing that we did everything to get there basketball-wise, and we also just enjoyed each other.

We're such a close group of girls, I'm going to miss them so much. I'm not even going to get into that (smiling).

Yeah, it's crazy.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, I think just the joy we have and the love we have for each other has really motivated us this whole season because we just want to do it for each other.

That just made it so special, and why we've been so successful this whole season.

Q. Lauren, Sienna comes in, plays the huge minutes in the first quarter. A critical part of this. What made her ready? How meaningful is it to share this with her?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think she understands the moment. This is the championship, it's at this point no one really cares how many points you score, what you do. She just wanted to go in and make an impact and help the team in any way she could.

For her to get crucial rebounds, go up against really strong bigs, that's huge as a freshman. Just really proud of her.

I can't wait to continue to watch her for the next three years. She's going to do amazing things.

Q. Your teammate Gianna is a plus 41 today, putting

together numbers all year. Talk about what she has meant to this program, to have this journey with her.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, Gianna is such a selfless player. She is a really freaking good basketball player. She helps us in so many ways.

Right when she joined this team she fit on the court but also off the court as well. Her transition has been so seamless because of how she's been willing to dive right into the culture of our program, add to it, make us better. Really excited for the things she's going to do. Grateful for the one year I got to play with her.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Being teammates with Gianna, she's an ultimate competitor, she works so hard. You always have so much trust in a person like that because you know they're going to be prepared.

Like Kiki said, the way she fit into this group so seamlessly, that says a lot about who she is as a player, and I'm just super proud of her.

Q. Lauren, it seemed like early in that first half you guys were okay with South Carolina's bigs taking shots. Your thoughts on how you executed that game plan, but also on how the guards did at pressuring South Carolina's guards so she couldn't get free?

LAUREN BETTS: I think it starts with that perimeter pressure. Our guards did a really good job of just making it difficult for them.

I think once we get stops, they're just not able to do what they want to do. I think that's what we want to get in transition, able to score.

Yeah, I think our guards did a really good job of just taking away the point guard's decision-making. For me, my job is to just protect the rim. Whatever they told me to do today in the scout, whether it's guard them out there, just protect the paint, I was going to do what I got to do, so...

Q. Gabby, 21 points -- Gabriela. Apologies. 21 points, 10 rebounds, 5 assists, your most points in an NCAA tournament game this year. What about you and your preparation allows you to thrive in the biggest moment?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: For me, just going into the game doing whatever the team needed. For me, just really focusing on defense and rebounding. That was a big part of our scouting report.

I had open shots and I made 'em. I think that was just kind



of what it was. Just super proud of this group and how we played as a team to get this victory.

Q. You've said this is a special group, bonded together. It's a lot of seniors, a lot of new in-comers. How early did any of you know or realize that this was the team?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think right from the beginning, right when we all got on campus, we knew that this group was going to be special. You could just feel the energy. We've been a part of a lot of basketball teams. I think you know when you have that competitive DNA in you. We get after it and compete at a high level, but we also love each other. That was the culture we created from day one, the culture that everyone was so willing to buy into.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: To add, I think since the roster was made, we just knew we had the tools. It was just about staying focused and working hard every day to be the best versions of ourselves. We continue to talk about going 1-0, taking it one game at a time, being our best selves. That led us to this moment.

I love this team so much.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I think it's just buying into the process. We have everybody you could possibly want on a team. So skilled at every single position that I think the maturity to come in and sacrifice yourself and your ego and be able to put that aside for moments like these, it makes it so worth it.

At the end of the day, no one's going to really care about how much you averaged this season when you have a freaking ring around your finger. No one cares (laughter).

Q. Lauren, what happened with your throat early on? Are you okay? Coach talks about this team being uncommon. This was an uncommon blowout in a national championship game. When did you feel that you locked it up?

LAUREN BETTS: To answer your question, I'm fine. I mean, like, now I am. I feel fine (laughter) yeah, no it's just dry out here. I don't know.

What was the other question?

I feel like I felt it in our prep. I mean, I felt like yesterday I knew that we were going to win just because we were so focused. When you have a certain energy in practice, you wake up the next morning, you're like, We have done everything you can possibly do to be ready for a game. It's just like the confidence that you have.

I feel like our energy was just really good. As soon as we came out the first couple minutes, everyone was just locking in on what they needed to do, winning their one-on-one matches. Rebounds was crucial. Yeah, I could tell from the very beginning.

Q. I asked Coach Close yesterday what you two have meant to the program, four-year players. After this game, after getting a national championship, what does this mean to you to spend all four years with this program and with a championship ring?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I mean, this is really so special. There is no better way we could hope to end our career. We played the last possible minutes of basketball that you could play in the season. We are the only team that's ending their season with a win.

Just to be grateful for all the moments we shared together over these four years. I just remember us coming in as freshmen, being in Cori's office, having the conversations of this is where we want to get to, we want to win national championships, play in Final Fours. To know we gave it our all, this is where it ended up. It's really rewarding because this is a special group of people. Just so grateful for all the moments.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, Kiki said it really well. Just coming in, being freshmen, that was the plan to cut down nets. I think we talked about it a lot. The fact that we won a national championship, wow, our senior year, like, it really does mean everything.

I said it before, but I pictured this moment many times, being a national champion. To do it with this group, it just really means everything.

Q. Gabs, your brother was here today. He had a great career at UCLA, played in numerous Final Fours. How big is it for you and your family to have those bragging rights over him having won a national championship when he didn't?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, thankfully my whole family was here, both my parents, both my brothers. A lot of aunts and uncles, cousins. I just really appreciate all their support being here.

I'm really thankful that my older brother Jaime made the flight over here, to support not only me but this whole team. He's really passionate about UCLA and our team. He has a lot of confidence in us, always supporting us.

I know it meant a lot to him as well. Not only him, but my



whole entire family. Senior Night was emotional for all of us because they've been all going to Pauley Pavilion for so many years. To finish out my career here at UCLA with a national championship really does mean everything.

Q. This was a dominant performance from the opening tip. Did any of you see any of the predictions of this game? Most were saying South Carolina, including everyone from ESPN, all picked South Carolina. Any of you saw that? Did that drive you?

LAUREN BETTS: I did, but I don't care. I mean, I'm pretty sure people had us losing. You know what? I don't even care. We just won a championship, so you know what, I don't really have much to say about that.

Q. Lauren, I saw you go into the stands. You were emotional, talking to some of your former teammates and your family. When you went up there, what was going through your mind?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I feel like there's so many people that have helped me get here today. My teammates, coaches, family, like my sophomore year here to have Izzy Anstey and Camryn Brown, who are really crucial parts of my life and process, how much I've grown as a person. They were crying more than I was just because they've seen me since my sophomore year, seen me grow up and mature, has been really special for them.

They mean so much to me. I just wanted to celebrate all with them.

Q. Gabriela, the other day you were talking about how you wouldn't want to play anywhere else. Can you describe the satisfaction of committing to a program that long in an era when there is so much transition and movement?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I mean, super satisfied with this result. And the journey was even better.

But I think coming in my freshman year, my dream was to be at UCLA. Just to have an offer from UCLA, it brought tears to my eyes when Coach Cori offered me. To now be playing there, Kiki coming in, we had a big freshman group. We were determined, the core group, to do something UCLA hadn't done before in the NCAA era. That was important for us. We always believed. We always believed.

I think Coach Cori started with that, just always believing in us. Again, I keep saying it, but I'm just super, super proud of this whole group, everyone in the program, for always believing. Job's finished. Job is finished.

Q. Looking back, how much did last year at the Final Four hurt/help you?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I do think that experience playing at the Final Four last year helped us just in our preparation from the spring to now. We knew what to expect. We knew what it would take to win at that level.

Having that experience, I feel like we were able to set our minds coming into this tournament, coming into the Final Four. Think this is what it's going to take to win it. This is what it's going to take to play high-level basketball, be really focused. Just our ability to do that regardless of the circumstances speaks to the maturity of this group and the mindset we were willing to take on.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, we talked about it a lot, about last year. I think that just really helped us. I mean, Kiki said it. We just knew what it takes. We knew what to expect.

Then coming in this year just being super confident in ourselves. We were better prepared. We knew what to expect, yeah.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I remember, like, being asked in an interview, I just never wanted to feel that way ever again. I feel like ever since then we've really just, like Kiki said, grown in our preparation. I feel like everyone understood the moment. Never had to question that we weren't going to go out there and be ready. You could tell on everyone's faces how bad we wanted it. When duty called, everyone answered, so I'm just really proud of this group.

Q. Gabriela, I found your brother after the game and asked him do you have bragging rights; he said yes, you do.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Of course I have bragging rights. I'm a champion now, so...

Yeah, I think just really appreciate his support. I think the impact he had on me is just, you know, really inspiring. I think just growing up watching him compete all the time, I guess we kind of played similarly, but that just comes from watching him, always supporting him. I would always go to his game because I just love watching him and supporting him.

Yeah, just really appreciate his support.

Q. Your college journey was included this NIL era, revenue share. How have you navigated that? What

support have you gotten from UCLA? Cori talked a lot about embracing this as a program.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I mean, I think we've been fortunate to experience a lot of changes over the four years that we've been here, been in college.

Just the support and the willingness to be able to recognize that playing college basketball now is like a job. It's not just something you show up to for fun. This is a job. We take it seriously. You get paid to do it. Just being ready to take on that mindset of you're a working young woman. Even we're only 18, 19 years old, it's true, we have to have that mentality. The coaches and entire staff do a great job of preparing us to really take on that mindset, to be smart businesswomen.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, I think Kiki said it great. I think all three of us just coming into college basketball just to want to play college basketball. Then throughout the years there's NIL, then you get paid.

I just think we just stayed true to who we are. It's not about that for us. It's about the love of basketball, the love we have for each other to get out there and compete.

Q. Lauren, this year you've been so vocal and so bright, in my opinion, about your mental health journey. You've overcome so much. What within yourself do you think has grown the most? What have you overcome the most within your mental health journey? What are you most proud of?

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, I would say, like, I can't thank this program enough firstly for how much they believed in me. When I came in my sophomore year, I was completely different than I am today. I showed up and I had zero confidence. I wasn't sure if I wanted to really, like, play basketball for that much longer.

Coach Cori really stayed patient with me. She wanted to see me accomplish everything that I'd ever dreamed of. They just continued to remind me, they want me to see myself the way they all see me. I feel like now at this point I can finally truly do that. I think that's what I'm most proud of.

It hasn't been an easy journey, but the way these people have truly embraced me for everything that I bring, and continue to love me, like, I love UCLA so much and I love these girls.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time, ladies, and congratulations again.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Close.

Q. There's been so much written about your relationship with Coach Wooden in the past. If you could talk to him today, what do you think the conversation would be like? How much will this help you and your staff because you have 12 hours before the transfer portal opens up?

CORI CLOSE: I did say to my mom, The transfer portal just got easier (smiling).

I think, God, I don't know. I think Coach Wooden actually wouldn't care as much about the championship as he would about staying true to our process.

I hope I would make him proud by realizing and recognizing that this is a by-product of what's happened in their habits, in their love for each other, in committing to a process over a long period of time.

When you just look at how the pyramid of success is built, the foundations, I just think he would be way more interested in hearing about that journey than he would about the final product because he knows that's a by-product of what was happening on the inside.

Q. I interviewed you earlier this year and one of the things you told me was you felt like you failed as a leader after last year's Final Four. Now that you've had time to come through this final year and get to this point, how do you evaluate yourself as a leader now?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I hope I'm a leader that chose to grow. If one of our core values is going to be a growth mindset, it has to start with me.

When you guys were asking the questions of them about what they learned from last year, being able to turn the pain of regret into the pain of discipline, to then see the chosen pain of discipline pay off in having championship habits today, that's really rewarding.

I just think that's the best part, right? When you ask Lauren about what she's most proud of, it's about what she was able to overcome. Even for me as a leader, I think I'm most proud of the ways in which I had truth tellers around me that told me the hard things, and that hopefully I had a humble heart to go, Okay, I receive that and these are the changes I have to be responsible to make.

Q. You, Gabriela, Lauren and their teammates wrote the pages to this championship season through hard work, a strong bond. What will stand out to you about this year winning it all?

CORI CLOSE: It's just so rare in life that you can start a journey with a group of people and really envision something, then trying to reverse engineer a plan that will actually lead you to the point that we're experiencing right now, that it actually happens, that you're in that position that you had planned for.

It's just really with great humility. Man, we are so fortunate to be experiencing that. They earned every bit of it.

I think that one of the things that we've been doing for the last about 30 days, every single day we've been starting out film with these "I will" statements. They have to write five to seven of 'em every time. Sometimes we will add gratitude statements, too.

The last three or four days at the end of our prep time we've been having each person, they can choose anyone, 21 of 'em, they came up with them, about things that were going to be important. They all had to recite one out loud.

When I literally think back even on the games of this Final Four, I just think about how many of those "I wills" they actually lived out. That's just so rewarding to see something that you really planned for, you really sacrificed for.

One of the things that they said is every player had to sacrifice. If any of our six seniors were on any other team, I believe they would have been an All-American, first team. To say that that is not as important to me than experiencing this together, wow, how lucky am I to be part of young women that would make that hard, right choice.

Q. The 1990s meetings with Coach Wooden, what are things he said to you or interactions that you had back then? How do you think those influenced how you coached even this season?

CORI CLOSE: It's really hard to narrow them down. They were so rich.

I've taken a lot of people with me to meet him. I try to always warn them that you need to write down questions because the wisdom is going to be so great you end up speechless.

The reality is is you leave his presence and you just go, I hope I can remember everything, every nugget that he, first of all, lived and role modeled, then, secondly, taught.

I remember he passed away the year before I got this job. I remember thinking to myself, Oh, my gosh, I don't want to let him down. The biggest way I can pay it forward is to

live in a way and coach in a way and teach in a way that pays it forward what he did for me (tearing up).

I think the biggest thing he did is every time I would ask him, What would you do here? He would never answer. He would always make me realize that I'm wired uniquely, and it wasn't about what he would do, it's how am I wired to lead to my best.

I remember feeling the sense of freedom going into my press conference because I was -- and Nan, his daughter, was right there front row. His son, Jim, has been so supportive of us all year long. His great granddaughter Cori, I owe her everything, because if I hadn't spelled it like her, he never would have let me in the door.

I really think about if I'm going to make him proud for how he poured into me, it's going to be about keeping it about the process and truly loving kids well for things that are way beyond UCLA. That's where we get to teach, mentor and equip for life beyond UCLA. I couldn't be more grateful for the time he gave me.

Q. In sports we talk about delayed gratification. It took you 15 years to get to the mountaintop. It took Wooden 16 years. Now that you finally have reached this moment and can silence criticism about not being able to hack it in these big moments, how satisfying is it?

CORI CLOSE: I really never listened to those things. I care that my players feel that we show up for them. I care that the families of our players feel like we lived out what we told them when we recruited them. I care about having consistency with our mission.

This really is a by-product and it really is only meaningful because of the people I get to share it with. I wondered how it would feel. I really did expect us to win today. I thought about it several times. I'm like, We're going to win. I felt very peaceful all day.

It wasn't about whether or not we got the W or not. I wanted us to be able to play our best when our best was needed. We delivered on that.

It just is so much for me not about a national championship, but it's the validation that it can be done differently.

Q. On Gianna, what she was able to do for this team, obviously a plus 41, can you take me through how meaningful it is for you to have her succeed when she's someone who works as hard as she does. She went through heartbreak in the NCAA tournament.

CORI CLOSE: Gianna is a spectacular competitor. One of the things I thought we really could give her, she's always had to be the most hard-working player. She's always had to do it alone. I think that I told her, I said, When you come here, you will get buoyed by the comradeship of everybody does that here. That's the baseline expectation here.

She was like, Really, that can happen?

I knew she was a competitor. I knew she would work her tail off. I didn't know she was as funny as she is. I didn't know she was going to fit in so seamlessly off the court.

I also have to give a shout-out to her coach at Utah, Coach Rob. She's a really good friend of mine. We FaceTimed her together right before we went in the locker room. I just think she prepared her really well. We are really lucky to have the by-product of that.

Q. About 10 years ago you said you had the pyramid of success in your office, you had only the bottom rungs lit.

CORI CLOSE: Good memory.

Q. You talked about the fact you look at those 10 banners every single time you go out to practice. What's the status of how many are lit on the pyramid of success? What does it mean to know you're going to bang a banner right there?

CORI CLOSE: It is this humbling thing. Before every game, because of where our bench is in Pauley Pavilion, we watch down that hallway, and I literally touch each one. I just imagine that someday the by-product could be us hanging one. That is incredibly rewarding.

I think the pyramid of success, there's a reason it's been so timeless. There's a reason that -- I think I saw an article a couple years ago by Forbes Magazine that it's still the most widely used business motivational tool.

Character never goes out of style. And I think that all of us, in life, sports, whatever, as we grow in our character, we grow in our consistency, good things happen.

I just think it's all lit now. We are believing in it in its entirety. But it will always be about the foundation first.

Q. I spotted Carol Walters outside in the arena after y'all won. She said that she wishes she got some of that deal money in NIL back then in 1995. You were an assistant with UCLA back then. Can you tell what the difference was back then for the players, even some of

the coaches like yourself, compared to now?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think it was interesting. Ed O'Bannon really started that movement. I had a chance. I was at UCLA when they won the national championship in '95. Just being a part of amazing people, we have some young men in this room that are part of that group. Ryan Hollins I happened to see today who was one of the beginning people.

I think what I love is is that it is a different era now. What they said is that, yes, they're thankful to be able to benefit from that, but it can't overtake our love of the game or our love of each other.

I do think it's night and day different deal. We're a professional organization now. We're building front offices. We have roster construction. I have GMs. It's a different landscape.

I was totally formed, I was in the building in Seattle when they won that. I used to stay after work and just sit up in the rafters and watch that team practice.

It's hard for me to even articulate how that formed me at the very beginning of my career. Those were my first two years of coaching. To be in this position now, I really go back to that.

But it's interesting, when I got to UCLA as a head coach, I wrote six UCLA men's alum and I wrote six UCLA women's alums through the decade and said, What do you wish UCLA did for you that they didn't? What advice would you give me?

One of the first ones was financial literacy. The second one is providing more resources for mental health. The third one was access to the UCLA alumni network with more intentionality.

I have tried to be methodical about that because it doesn't do any good if we give them this money, if they're pros, and we don't give them the equipping to actually be able to maximize those for real opportunities that change lives.

I go back to those letters and those responses of how we built our infrastructure even now.

Q. You've talked about the sacrifices you've made in your own life to get to this point. Now that you're at this point, won it with this group, does it change the way at all you think about those sacrifices?

CORI CLOSE: No. I think I've always thought that sacrifices are worth it, whether I wouldn't keep doing them.

But they literally are my family. I don't have a family of my own. So I really do think of them like children. What would their parents want from me as sort of their basketball mama?

What is an amazing thing is to be able to share this with a staff. Not only do I respect my staff so much but I love them deeply. They really in some ways have become a second family for me.

I feel very purposeful about the sacrifices I've made on a personal level for what I believe is trying to live imperfectly but live out my calling. But I wouldn't trade it.

Q. You mentioned your coaching staff. Obviously so many players came before this moment. One of the people on your staff is Michaela. What was it like to share that moment with her? She said that Jordyn Canada had texted her about the moment.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, we were teasing her in the locker room. She was really emotional. Coach Tony was, About time we just had to get some better players. We were just giving her a hard time.

There's been these really special moments. It was right when starting lineups were about to be announced. I was standing next to Michaela. She just put her arm around me. I'm just so happy to be a part of this. She was so emotional after the game. Her mom Edith and her high school guidance counselor Miss Dotson (phonetic) was here. There's just been a connection piece with her. I can't even put words to it. It's just like she sort of gets it.

Even this morning as we did our walk-through, I got the whole circle together, I talked about the strength of the bond and how three strands woven together, they just can't be broken, just valuing every person in the circle from managers to video interns to everybody else.

Right after that Michaela came right to me and held on to me. To share that with a former player, she's just really special (tearing up).

I didn't know what it was going to be like. I didn't know that she was going to be such a dang good coach. She's really good. She's probably got a long pro career that she's going to live out first.

This was even better experiencing this with her than I thought.

THE MODERATOR: We are at time, so we want to thank you for your time this evening.

CORI CLOSE: If I wasn't so longwinded, more people could have questions. But thank you so much. Appreciate you.

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