

GEICO Players Era Women's Championship

Wednesday, November 26, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Gianna Kneepkens

Kiki Rice

Women's Postgame Press Conference

Texas 76, UCLA 65

CORI CLOSE: Credit to Texas. They played a really good game. They played the way we wanted to do. We didn't do anything to stop it the first half. Just they asserted their style of play on us. We reacted to it instead of dictating how we wanted to play the game. That's what we allowed to have happen.

Reality was that we needed to win the rebound battle, the turnover battle, and we won neither. The difference of those, our offensive rebounds and turnovers, it was 12 points. They had 34, and we had 22. We lost by 11.

It's really simple. They are really simple, but they're incredibly disciplined and tough. Their style beat our style. Ultimately that's my job as the head coach, is to help us respond, let this pain help us change some behaviors.

I was really honest with 'em. There's some things we've been talking about that we haven't gotten enough changed. Maybe this will get us to change some things that led to this.

I have total confidence in the leadership of this group, their desire to respond, their coachability. But they were the tougher, more together team today.

We talked about a lot as a team that we have to be able to execute together, and we have to be an elite defensive and rebounding team. They didn't do those three things. We lost. So we got to do 'em better.

Q. Gianna, coach mentioned some things that you haven't been doing. Seems similar to the North



Carolina game in that North Carolina came out and sort of dictated the pace. Is that something that's been talked about?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think we're a very veteran team, like most people know. We know what it takes. Like coach said, our discipline just hasn't been consist of starting out strong.

So I think we lost, but we have the opportunity to learn from this. We don't like this feeling of losing. I think we're going to make a change.

Q. Kiki, we talked about taking over moments, not games. Your moment came in the fourth quarter. Could you sense at some point you were going to make a run?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think it was all about team momentum and energy. I really like how we kind of came out the end of the third quarter, fourth quarter with our pressure, the way we were defending them. We have saw that shift, and that created opportunities for us in the end of the game. We had some of our best execution, our best screening. Kind of we executed what we talked about.

It's just a battle of how can we do that 40 minutes, especially at the start of the game, we don't want to get frustrated or out of our style of play. It's bringing that consistency across all 40 minutes.

Q. Gianna, you were the catalyst for the big comeback in the third and fourth quarter. What good can you take from that performance that you had?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think the good we can take out of it is the fact that there was some fight. I think we were down 15 or something. We got it to 4 to a really good team.

I think the good is that we know what it takes, and we saw what it takes. The results that come from playing hard defense, rebounding, crashing, so that's the good we can take out of it is that we can learn.

Q. Coach, this is obviously a great opportunity to play some real good teams. You've already played some good teams. How do you kind of temper the pace of a

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season when you have games of this magnitude, but the bigger prize is still a long way away?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think that the bottom line for us is that we have to maintain a growth mindset. The hardest part, maybe it will work to our benefit, maybe I can't get in the way, you want to get out there and practice, let's get after this and learn what we need to learn.

Honestly, as a competitor, I'm just so pissed off that we didn't compete better, you know? As a long-term developer of what we need to become in March, I think being undefeated for a long period of time in the past couple years did not serve us well.

I think there's sometimes some things, we've been saying some things over and over again that all of a sudden now their ears are going to be a little bit bigger, hearts a little bit softer, willing to make some changes on some things we haven't had the discipline to change yet.

We got caught. I think if you look back at national champions over the last several years, a lot of 'em have some games like this. I think just recently about UConn-Tennessee game. I remember seeing that and then looking how they respond.

But response is a choice. Discipline is a skill and a choice that you have to let it teach your heart and change behaviors. I'm very confident in this group, that they will respond in a really healthy way. That's my job and our coaching staff's job is to put them in environments and situations that they have to do that.

I said their choice is going to be they can either sulk about this and make excuses about this or they can look back on it and go, That's when we got really serious, that's when we understood at a different level and created championship habits the rest of the way through.

Q. In the summer you mentioned that Gianna could be like the missing puzzle piece for you guys. She defended really well in the second half, made a lot of plays. Is she a player you feel like can spark you guys going forward?

CORI CLOSE: I mean, Gianna is a great player. Obviously she helps us a lot from a shooting perspective and spreading the floor out. But what I loved about what she did is when she got serious about defense in the second half. I still think there's a lot more growth in her in that area that I think she can be much more consistent in that.

I think she's a play-maker for us. We don't see her as a

shooter. We wanted to put her in ball screen action, we really wanted to force their fives to have to recover on that.

The first half we kept rejecting the ball screen. We didn't get Gianna in that mix enough. We talked about trying to initiate, especially when they matched up with their four on her, we wanted to create hand-offs and get her up and try to exploit that mismatch.

We didn't handle their pressure the way that we needed to in order to be able to manipulate some of those matchups and put Gianna in some of those play-making positions. Hopefully that's what we'll learn from that.

Gianna is so much more than a shooter. We rely on her. We need her to step up in some big ways, too, just like Kiki and Charlissee. I really came right at those three. Our guard play that way has to be rock solid. Their work ethic is not in question. They're phenomenal, best I've been around. Their desire and team orientation, amazing.

We got out-toughed and out-led in the first four minutes. I need to work directly with them. Guard play determines things in these games. They I know are going to respond at a new level.

Q. Texas has a unique defensive challenge. Vic talked about how their post defense starts 30 feet out with the pressure they put on the perimeter.

CORI CLOSE: He's right.

Q. When you look on that side for you guys, battling through that pressure, where do you see how you can grow in that lane?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think there's two things.

We really wanted to attack more through the middle of the floor. We ended up bringing her high and then attacking with the guards off the bounce. That's because we were doing such a poor job getting her post touches.

I will be much more objective after I watch the film. But the first two plays of the game, she was shoved off the lane, I mean, six feet. There was no call. That set a tone of what kind touches we were going to be able to get with her.

So I do think there needs to be consistency in that. There can't be physicality allowed in some areas and not in others. We needed to be able to get her touches in certain ways.

The part I need to take responsibility for is she's got to do a better job of getting people behind her and not letting them



get to the full front, three-quarters around. I got to do a better job of getting that flash cut earlier and we got to create catches to be able to take advantage of that high-low.

We have to be able to attack the space off the bounce that they're not rotating to help on. We kept throwing really long passes out of that. That didn't work out so well. We've got to learn from those things. Ultimately that's my job, is to help our team put structurally and tactically in some better positions to take advantage of that.

It's their job to really execute what we're asking them to do. It's a both-and. Obviously I'm ultimately responsible. We didn't play to the level of toughness and togetherness that we needed to to win this game. Ultimately it's my job to help 'em change that.

But I agree the bottom line is not Lauren there, it's their defense forcing us to have such hard reads. Credit to them, they played the way they wanted to play, and we didn't respond enough.

Q. What positives can you take about the way the team responded? Is there something you can take from the way the team came back?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, absolutely. I think whenever you have those moments where you can fold and give up or you can just fight and claw the best you can.

We talked about on a couple of our other games of top 10 or 11 level opponents that we felt like we got 'em to quit. We just kept coming at 'em, coming at 'em. We had a choice to make. We were down. We were not playing the way we wanted or prepared, we were frustrated.

I thought at halftime they did a really good job. We talk a lot about getting to neutral. We were not neutral in any timeout. They were looking right past me on this.

I thought they did a great job in the second half going, Okay, let's get to neutral so we can make the next right step and fight and claw.

We got to it four. Had a chance to cut it to one on a good execution place, out of bounds on Gianna. I'm not mad at them for that. I'm proud of them for that.

There's a lot to be said about how you choose to respond. We got punched in the gut. It took us a long time. I think the positive is they got a taste and they know they can do it. They know they can respond. We'll build off of that.

Q. Is Lauren okay?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I don't know yet. I haven't had a chance to talk to the docs yet. We'll go from there.

Q. Away from the game, there's a proposal on the table in terms of transfer portal, shortened to 15 days and not open until after the Final Four. Your thoughts on that.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, actually I'm for that for a lot of reasons.

I always want to have a global mindset about being concerned about how it affects our entire game. I just think it's really poor business to have -- there's a couple levels. One, if you have a transfer portal that's open during the NCAA tournament, you are going to force administrations to make rush decisions on coaching carousel decisions. Everyone is going to try to have to have their coach hired by the time that the portal opens, right?

There's a lot of people that are going to rush through that. It's just going to increase the amount of tampering that's going to be encouraged to take place, during the most important time we want to showcase the best of the best in our game.

Secondly, I think the reality is in our coaching profession, the Final Four and the convention is a time where we're encouraged to grow. I've been doing this 33 years. 32 of them I've been at that convention. I've been a part of that group that's trying to grow the game and trying to learn.

What happened last year with the portal open is the whole convention, they were all in their hotels on Zoom calls with transfer kids. Most important part where we want to be together and growing our game at a global level, I think it's a mistake to take away from something.

If you were to think about businesses and their time when that business needs to be at their best -- we have a lot of people excited about Black Friday. They have to be at their best when the best is needed. To have that level of distraction I think is a complete mistake for growing our game.

I think it's really important that we make that change. I obviously have a lot of transfers on my team. I've been on both sides of the fence in terms of having people transfer out and people transfer in.

I'm not critical of people in that. Everyone's story is different and there's some really good reps. If we truly want to build on the momentum of our game to have it where it's been in the past in the middle of our most



important time I think is hampering the growth of our game.

Appreciate you guys being here. Thank you for covering our sport.

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