

GEICO Players Era Women's Championship

Thursday, November 27, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Gabriela Jaquez

Kiki Rice

Women's Postgame Press Conference

UCLA - 89, Duke - 59

CORI CLOSE: First of all, thank you all for being here and waiting today and for covering this great event. It was an honor to be part of it and to have all these great teams no one knows about unless you're telling our story. So, thank you guys for what you're doing.

This was all about response and their ownership. And what I told them in the locker room is they learned the power of their own choice. They had a players-only meeting where they talked about how they wanted to handle some tactical things.

And it actually wasn't how we game planned, some of it, but what happens is it doesn't matter what it is. When they choose to say, hey, we're going to make this work together, we're going to choose this, they can make anything work.

And this was all about their response to a disappointing manner in which we played in the first half against Texas. This wasn't about responding just to beat Duke -- and Duke's going to be a really good team and they're going to respond as well -- but this was about, for us, responding to play in the manner in which we need to play to be the best version of ourselves. And I thought the first quarter we really did that.

We still have some things we need to cinch up in terms of consistency and urgency in some areas, but that was really important that they were going to respond mentally and connected. And they did exactly that, so I'm really proud of them.

Q. Kiki and Gabriela, what are some of the goals that



you had for this game that you might discuss that you are able to share?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, we just wanted to kind of work on the fluidity of our ball movement and how we really controlled the pace of the game. I think anyone watching us, we have a ton of really talented players on the floor at all times. (Indiscernible) would be the most difficult to guard, putting people in their best positions. Today you saw that, just the way we moved the ball, everyone got to their spots, got to their shots. And I'm just proud of how we responded and took ownership.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: To add, we just wanted to come out better and come out of the gates ready to play and bring up the intensity and aggression, especially on defense.

Q. Coach said it, but in your words, how much was it needed to make a statement to yourselves beyond yesterday's game, just in general to play like that?

KIKI RICE: We have had and we continue to have utmost confidence in ourselves. I think this is a long season. It's November. It's about figuring out how we play best as a unit.

And there's going to be ups and downs throughout the season, and staying confident in ourselves and in who we have as a collective group is going to be the most important thing. But I thought showing the response and fight that we demonstrated to ourselves is really big.

Even in the second half of the Texas game, that fight started there. And I was really proud of -- it was a really positive takeaway. And I think we can carry on throughout the season.

Q. Gabriela, beyond the depth, we touched upon that the previous tournament here a couple weeks ago. But to show the depth tonight without Lauren in the lineup had to mean something as well?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Again, we just have so much confidence. Obviously we wish Lauren could be playing with us. But when she's out, Coach Cori always says next woman up. We're always ready and always putting in the work.



And we want to have her back, too. If she can't play a game, we're going to come out ready. And I'm really proud of how we came out after yesterday's game.

Q. You guys had two big games. Obviously, you get to go home, but you have Tennessee looming in three days. What are some of your thoughts getting ready to reset for that? And a week after that you have your conference opener.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, we'll fly home tonight, recover tomorrow and then get prepped for Tennessee. Tennessee is obviously a great team. We'll be ready forward that. It will be a tough schedule, but it's going to prepare us for the postseason, so we're excited about the competition we're going to play.

Q. Kiki, Coach said you guys had a players-led meeting. It was only players. I'm wondering how that went and who took the role of like the leader to talk to everybody, or whether you guys shared that role?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, we just wanted to, like Coach Cori said, talk through some tactical things and figure out how can we best get on the same page. But I felt it was really big on -- I think we have strong leadership in this team. And you see it with everyone who's on the court.

We have really good leadership. Charlissee and Gabs did a really good job of talking us through certain things we wanted to get better on in the offense. And I think that shows the extent of leadership we have in this group.

Q. First off, just in general, any update on Lauren? And you heard about the next-woman-up mentality. On a game that feels important to bounce back, to not have Lauren in that, can you talk about that aspect of it, to be able to go and bounce back without her in the lineup?

CORI CLOSE: I wish you could give them toughness and confidence. They have to earn that. And I think there's no shortcuts to earning it. You have to conquer hard things. And believe me, it wasn't the news I wanted.

We were going to try -- even as we were going to test some things to see if we thought she could go, even up to shoot-around. And our medical staff is, you know, it's not wise.

Now we're on to that next position. But I'm sure there was, like, you know, obviously Lauren affects a lot of plays on both sides of the ball. I was really interested to see how they would respond, what was their demeanor like, what was their talk with each other. And they really chose that.

And the next woman up is, let's go, we have plenty to do here, execute the game plan, do it with our defense, want it more than them.

One of the things I really challenged them the most on was we didn't get our passion-play goals against Texas. And I'm just, like, of all the goals not to get in a game like that, I think that's a regret we're all going to have. Like what led to that?

And that's the thing I'm most excited about in their response today is that they did it -- it wasn't always perfect. There's things we still need to clean up in transition defense and consistency of the scouting report and things like that. But they really did, they leaned into the hard. And they grabbed and earned confidence and toughness today.

And specifically, Amanda Muse, she's been not feeling well. And so not only does she not have a ton of experience in some big-moment games, but she wasn't feeling 100 percent. And so I thought there was -- when Angela Dugalic got in foul trouble and she came in and really made some really key plays for us, that's an example.

And I just really give all -- I thought Lena Bilic came in and gave us really good minutes. And I thought that was going to be key.

And I wish I could give it to them, but they earned it. And they earned some great confidence in their response.

Q. Do you encourage the player-only meetings? Do you think that's a positive for your team?

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely. The reason I'm so excited about that is that we have been -- this is a very mature team, a lot of experience -- that anytime something is player-led, there's deeper commitment. They are solution-minded themselves. They're not looking at the bench for things for us to solve things for them.

And in March, to go win a championship, you need to have that. And I've been trying to do more and more things in practice where we don't provide the answers, that they have to work through chaos, work through failure and learn to be solution finders on their own.

You know, I think, as a coach, I want to help them, you know? But that doesn't empower them. And I have a much deeper desire to empower them to learn to earn their business and to be empowered to do what they can do on their own.

If they decide to take things on on their own, there's such trust. It would be different if there wasn't trust built in relationships. But I think, bring it on. Do it every day if you want.

Q. I stepped out and came back in as you were talking about Lauren. If I may ask, you may have answered this. Is she available for Sunday? Do you know yet? Is it week-to-week? What is the ETA?

CORI CLOSE: I don't know. We did get some positive on our first details of some hopefully not really dangerous things. But we're going to have to get imaging when we get back and do things like that. I don't know for sure.

We were really trying to get her back to play today, and it was very evident this morning that it just wasn't going to be wise.

But I probably won't know until we get some further testing done tomorrow.

Q. And then slightly off topic, you told me last week about these messages that Kiki sends you. What's the latest that you've got -- have you woken up to one, and she sends it like she's up watching film or something -- you said it's 3:00 in the morning?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, sometimes she'll send me like a play she likes, or I think I told you about the press conference of the Oklahoma City Thunder GM and thought it was very parallel to some of our mindset and how we needed to approach things.

Actually, it was most recently we went back and forth, between yesterday and today, about we thought this was going to be a more guard-oriented game because of this and how were we going to create downhill drives for her. So we went back and forth of just what I thought and what she thought. So it was more collaborative. I didn't get a late-night text, though, I'm sure we were both up. At the same time, we did have collaboration on what I thought her best actions were going to be.

Q. Kiki talked about how talented the roster is and how important it is to play as a unit. Something that striked me when I saw the box score was all five starters amassed at least 12 points. Was that the game plan going? And how will this game inform the rest of the season?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that was one of our really big goals, actually, coming out of the Final Four, one of our pain points in learning things were, we stared at Lauren a

whole lot last year, and we needed to have other people -- they were capable, but they weren't totally confident. And so figuring out how to get, to not take down an emphasis on we have a superpower in someone there that's going to draw double teams and force rotations, but also having that balance of you're a great basketball player, too, and what's your best shot? And how do we help each other create those.

And in different games, there's going to be different things. I thought Gianna had one of her best games. She didn't have as many points, but she had six rebounds and something you guys don't see on the stat sheet, she had six assist box-outs. So she took out her player and someone else ran it down.

Like, to me, it's all those areas, right, that how can we get them all confident and anticipatory about how they can impact winning on both sides of the ball. And that balance is what we're shooting for. It's not easy. Some games will be different than others.

Texas was running the post and really physical, and I might argue, wrapping the post a little bit. But who knows? Little do I know. But the reality is that that was a little bit different than what we'd been facing. So we have to adjust to that and learn about how to take advantage of that and how other people can take advantage of that.

Driving lanes were created, and she was playing on the high side, why didn't we burn them on that? That's my job to be a good teacher and adjuster in that. But to see the balance in there tells me everybody's learning how to respond in their own way to their own strengths. I thought the biggest example of that was Charlisse Leger-Walker and Kiki Rice, who were both disappointed in how they responded in the Texas game. And then they came back, I thought, in their own way, made huge strides in the best versions of themselves. I thought that was really important for us. Guard play is everything.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports