

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 7, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

JuJu Watkins

Kiki Iriafen

Postgame Press Conference



LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: They do a really good job. They play essentially four guards who can shoot the ball, and we wanted to defend the 3-point line really well. At the same time, they raised their 5 player high away from the basket. You sell out to the 3-point line and give up some layups.

I think that gives a lot of people problems. I thought early on we did a nice job on the 3-point line and gave up two many easy 2s. We wanted to make them take tough 2s. I thought later in the game our disruption started to play a factor in it. I thought Kennedy Smith was really good defensively. I thought these two were really good defensively. A number of people did a good job, Avery Howell. So we kind of got more into a defensive rhythm.

I would have liked to turn the ball over a little bit less and keep them from getting points off turnovers as well because their action is hard enough to guard in the half-court.

Q. JuJu and Kiki, 52 combined points was clearly the winning recipe tonight. In those second and third quarters, how can you get your teammates a little bit more involved?

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think for us it kind of just starts on the defensive end. I think we had some lapses in the second and third where we kind of let them get hot and do what they wanted to do. I think we fouled a lot, myself particularly, and that helped keep them in the game.

I think just making sure on the defensive end we're doing what we need to do, but I think offensively we kind of all know our roles, and everybody is capable of shooting and scoring.

Q. JuJu and Kiki, how important is it to have these games to give you guys tough tests going into the tournament, that there's not a chance to slack off?

JUJU WATKINS: I think knowing what's on the line, all the games are going to be like that. We don't expect to just go in there and blow the other team out because there's so much on the line and this conference is so good.

USC - 84, Indiana - 79

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and start today's first press conference with USC, Coach Lindsay Gottlieb, JuJu Watkins, and Kiki Iriafen.

Coach, if you would make an opening statement.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Sorry, the walk here was winded. I didn't even play the game.

Thank you guys for being here. Really great atmosphere at Gainbridge. I really appreciate the job the Big Ten does in bringing out fans and media to make this a great event.

We knew this was going to be work. We knew this was going to be a tough one. Indiana is a really good team. They're an NCAA Tournament team. We'll be rooting for them to make a second weekend and keep it going.

I told Coach Teri I thought she's done a great job.

For us, I'm really proud of our group. We found out right before the game that Rayah couldn't go, and everyone stepped up. I thought we played really hard. I think Indiana poses some issues for us guarding them. They give you so much action.

Our two All-Americans played like All-Americans and a number of people stepped up, and that's why we've become the team that we've become.

Q. Lindsay, what were you most concerned about coming into this game against Indiana, a team that played you kind of close last time? And what do you think your team could have done better?



We always go in knowing that we're going to play our best and do whatever it takes to win. Then it comes down to the intangibles and tough plays that win the game.

Q. JuJu, with this performance today, you move into second all time in 30-point games for a USC women's basketball player. I know you probably talk about it all the time, but as your sophomore season comes to a close, how do you process your position in both USC and women's basketball history?

JUJU WATKINS: I don't really think about it much, if I'm being honest. Like I said, I just go out there and play for the team, and whatever's needed in me, I do.

Yeah, I think it's just a testament to the long nights in the gym and a team and a coach that really trusts in me. I'm able to play to the best of my ability.

Q. Kiki and JuJu, you guys really took over in the third quarter but IU kept the game still close during that time. How much does the lack of made 3s limit your offense?

KIKI IRIAFEN: That's a hard question. I mean, I think we're all very capable of making 3s, and I trust all my teammates. This is also our first time playing in this gym, so I think we've gotten that first win and our first time playing in this gym, so I think tomorrow will be much better.

We're more than capable of making 3s. It was just an off day.

Q. You alluded to being shorthanded today. Can you talk a little more about that situation, how it impacted you, and Rayah's status going forward.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Rayah is a leader for us. She's had an incredible season. She's a great player. We always want her on the floor.

We found out shortly before the game that she couldn't go. She's battling an illness, and it just prevented her from being able to go, so hopefully we get her tomorrow.

We also have a lot of trust in our entire team. You always want to go in at full strength, but you also want the team to be ready to do what they need to do.

Two things happened because she was out, we started small and played Kiki at the 5 and went four guards. Then we came in with Clarice, who I thought gave great minutes as well.

Q. Coach, a third quarter, two ties, four lead changes, and a young lady named Garzon. Boy, she can knock 3s down. IU runs the offense that you commented about. Just your thoughts on that third quarter and how it affected your ball club.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: They're really good, they're really well-coached, and they're old, right? Garzon is old. Chloe Moore-McNeil is old. Parrish is old -- veteran. I don't mean old, but veteran. Kids like that are not going to go out without a really tough fight. They're excellent players, and I thought we had to adjust.

I do think moving Kennedy Smith onto Garzon affected the game. She is just an elite defender. I'm really proud of the fact we have 2 of the 5 all-defensive players in the Big Ten in Rayah and JuJu, but I think Kennedy probably doesn't get enough credit for how she impacts the game defensively, and I thought we had to do that because of how hot Garzon got during that time.

Q. Lindsay, you talked about how good of a shooting team this is and how they keep multiple shooters on the floor. Up until they had to start heaving 3s at the end of this game, they were way below the normal 3-point attempts in Indiana. What did you do to make sure they weren't getting up 3s cleanly throughout the game?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We watched the game yesterday, right. That was probably the difference in the game. There was a lot of even stats between Oregon and Indiana, but the 3-point line, and over time their wins, the made 3s are really high.

Our perimeter defenders are really good and really athletic, so we feel like we can put pressure at the point of attack. What that did give up then because they have multiple three-point shooters, in the flare screen, they can slip. We went over and they curled again. Again, our basket protection it's not the same when the 5 is high with the ball and they're a shooting threat.

It's an offense that poses problem. I think Teri is a great coach for a reason, and I think they figured out over the course of the season really their identity. I know they played so many years with such an amazing post player who graduated, so I think it maybe took them some time to adjust to not having the dominant low block.

Certainly I think they're playing well at the right time, and they're going to be an NCAA Tournament team that's very dangerous for someone that's not us.

Q. Just out of curiosity, I think we all know this time of



the season every year the matchups are going to get a little bit tougher. It's win or go home at this point. What's one thing you want your team to keep in mind going into the winner of Maryland-Michigan tomorrow?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: This is March basketball. Both of those teams are great teams, that we're going to have to come and win every possession. I've told the team a number of times, we get no bonus points for being the regular season champs. We get no bonus points for what we did yesterday, but we can derive from the success we've had what it is that makes us good. That you can carry forward with you all the time no matter what the circumstance presents.

But we're playing really good basketball teams from here on out, and we've got to be ready to go no matter which team it is.

Q. It seemed like, especially in the third quarter, every time IU was making a run, JuJu came up with some defensive play, whether it was a steal. She had a block at one point. Do you ever -- I don't want to say take that for granted, but it seems like she does that in every single game for you guys. How much of a luxury is it for you guys to have that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: How she has developed into the two-way player that she is is really remarkable. Think about what she handles on the offensive end. We get her the ball as much as we can. There's multiple bodies draped on her. She takes a lot of contact. She's a physical player. Then we say, oh, by the way, impact the game defensively too. She takes no breaks. She takes no breaks.

The things that she does, I never take any of it for granted, but we've come to expect what she's capable of. But the ways that she makes game-changing plays and makes something out of nothing for us and takes away something that looks easy for the other team is really tremendous.

Look, you guys probably know how I feel about it. I think she's the Player of the Year nationally for a number of different reasons, but I am glad that her game-changing ability on the defensive end is being talked about a little bit more because you see it.

Q. You talked about how you would have an NCAA Tournament feel, but you probably didn't know it would have a true road game feel until the matchup came out, right? What was that like, and how do you feel your players responded to the atmosphere today?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I love it. First of all, this is an

incredible arena. I hadn't been in here since I coached with the Cavs and we played the Pacers. When we were on the Indiana-Purdue trip, we practiced here, just to have them see it, not in the main arena, but in the Fever facility. To see it come to life here is great.

I joked about it with the staff, I'd rather have a lot of fans here even if they're rooting against us than not.

I have a feeling the Iowa fans that are here and travel may be rooting for us. Our fans were loud here. Credit to the IU fans who show up at their building. They have like 15,000 people come regularly, and for them to travel and show up for their team, it's great for women's basketball.

Hopefully we can continue to play a brand of basketball here where we get fans from these other Big Ten cities along the way. We want to play a way that make people gravitate towards us and really appreciative of our fans that traveled out here as well.

Q. Now having spent a year in this conference, have you learned anything about the Big Ten that you didn't know before? Does anything surprise you what this has been like?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, the depth of talent, the fact that we have teams that are 10, 11, 12 seeds here who might be a better seed in the national tournament is wild, right? Iowa is an 11 seed, because of the depth of talent. Nebraska at a 10. The depth of talent, I think, is really impressive, that we were playing NCAA Tournament teams night in and night out with 12 or 13 teams in this league. I think that's the main thing.

I think the fans that people draw on the road, and I think when we played most teams got higher than their average attendance. We got great fan attendance on the road. The love of women's basketball out here has been very prevalent for us.

Lastly, I would say our players definitely learned there's cold and there's Midwest cold. It hits them different every time we got off of the plane. We had some real deep freezes getting out here, and I think it makes them appreciate living in L.A. just a little bit more.

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