

# Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 8, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

**USC Trojans**

**Lindsay Gottlieb**

**Malia Samuels**

**Avery Howell**

Postgame Press Conference

USC - 82, Michigan - 70

THE MODERATOR: We're going to go ahead and get started with the USC portion of today's press conference. Joining us is Coach Lindsay Gottlieb, Avery Howell and Malia Samuels.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First, I have to start with crediting Michigan. We had to win that game. We had to earn that game. They gave us nothing. So impressed by KBA and the job she's done this year.

She and I saw each other recruiting this summer. You know how things go. They lost some kids in the portal. She had some freshmen coming in. To see from the unknown to what they've become is a credit to their culture, their players. They've had a great year, and we'll be rooting for them in the NCAA Tournament.

Super proud of our team. I think this shows exactly how far we've come. We had to earn this one. We got better throughout the game offensively against their pressure. I thought we had to come together and have a fight, which we did. I thought we got contributions from everywhere.

Obviously Ju and Kiki cannot be guarded by one person, and they showed you and did their thing, but we are not where we are without the contributions of our leadership. I thought Rayah coming off her illness held us together, held it down, made her buckets. Kim's got cramps with the way she defends.

These two here who are also young -- Avery's a freshman, Malia's a sophomore -- I thought changed momentum, changed tempo, and we don't get where we want to get to without this whole group. I thought this was on display



today, and these two are a huge part of that.

I'm really proud of the group and onto the next.

**Q. It was obviously a tight back-and-forth game, and then you rolled off 14 consecutive points, which was pretty incredible. What was it like in the middle of that run? What went into it, and what did it feel like to be out there when it was happening?**

MALIA SAMUELS: It was super exciting to be out there. I knew our run was coming. We were due for a run, and I just heard Rayah during our timeout saying, this group is going to get a run, this group is going to get a run. So I think that really helped us get it going, and it was super exciting to be out there.

**Q. Malia, you have this really impressive defensive sequence in the second where there was this really nice block into a steal. You guys were playing from behind a lot in the first. I mean, most of the first. How do you keep up that defensive intensity when you're playing with your back up against the wall like that?**

MALIA SAMUELS: Just having my team's back is the main thing. I know my role coming off the bench, I'm in there to make a run go or start defense. I think that's the main thing is just wanting to help my team and do the best thing for my team regardless of our backs being against the wall. If we're up 20, down 20, it doesn't matter to me.

**Q. Last time you played Michigan, they didn't have Sylva Swords. Tonight she was the leading scorer. Just what impact did she have on the game today, and what new look does she give you?**

AVERY HOWELL: I think that Sylva -- obviously I'm on the Canadian national team with Sylva, so I've known her for a while. But I think she plays with a lot of heart, a lot of passion. Definitely we knew that was going to be a difference maker for their team for sure.

I think our team coming in knew that and were prepared for that and did our best to guard her any way we could -- switching, communicating. But I think she had a really

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good game and gave it her all for sure.

**Q. Avery, it seems like you're one of the -- I would say the most reliable shooter from around the perimeter from three. What kind of goes into your preparation to be ready for those moments? You had only 3 points in the first half, and you stepped up in the fourth quarter when your team needed you. What was kind of the feeling going into it and the mindset of closing out the game to reach the championship?**

EVERY HOWELL: I think for myself as a 3-point shooter, it's just preparation. I'm always in the gym, always getting shots up. Any time my coach needs me to execute a play or get a shot for our team, I am prepared, and I try to execute to the best of my abilities.

I think today obviously Ju and Kiks are getting guarded really hard, so there was more opening for me to get shots. I wasn't super hot from three today, so I tried to get other things to work out, leaking out, getting layups. Malia found me around the rim a couple times. I knew that fourth quarter was going to be huge for our team, and I just tried to show up in any way I could.

**Q. JuJu was held pretty well by Michigan in the first half, but then in the second half, Kiki stepped up and kind of kick-started your offense. I wonder if you could talk about what it's like to play with her?**

EVERY HOWELL: I think Kiki is a huge presence as well, so is JuJu. I think Kiki is so lethal from the elbow that she has to be guarded, but then she can get down that lane line. So I think she's super challenging for anyone to try to guard.

Then her decision-making ability to take a dribble if they slide over, kicking it out to a three or skipping it across the court, I just think she has so many different versions to her game it makes her really hard to defend.

**Q. Avery, you had this really nice run in the fourth with JuJu. You guys were back and forth with the scoring and pushing the team on that run. Can you speak to the intensity of playing such an important role in these moments as a freshman?**

EVERY HOWELL: It's the position I want to be in obviously. I'm confident. I am very vocal, so I feel like being in those situations it's super fun and exciting, and I'm a really big competitor, so I love those moments. Obviously our team has super high standards and expectations for our team and so do our coaches. I think we execute that every day in practice.

So I think stepping onto the floor, it's just kind of like our situations in practice and we're all out there together playing for each other. I think it's honestly a lot of fun to just be out there.

**Q. You guys are in the championship game. Do you have a preference whether you get UCLA for a third time or get Ohio State?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: (Laughs) That's going to be a no. Whoever wins, we'll be ready to play.

**Q. Obviously not the best shooting day for JuJu, but she had a play that sparked -- I felt sparked that 14-0 run where she was doubled, she kind of squeezed through the two defenders, made a leaning jumper. What does it say about her that she sticks with it in situations like that and leads the team even on what is not her best day?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We say not her best day because she's got three and four bodies on her all the time, and to still end up with 20 and 11.

I thought she showed a lot of poise. It was probably frustrating. She was getting trapped and doubled when she's with the ball in her hands. Tried to get her some looks kind of underneath the defense, but there were a lot of bodies there.

I thought her poise was really good today. I thought we tried to use her as a screener a bit in the second half and get Kiki free. I thought she played off that really well.

I thought her decision-making was good. She had a couple, no matter how many bodies there were, she has the ability to slide through and finish and finish through contact. She made some good decisions where she was able to drop it off to Kiki or found Avery on a spray.

I thought she was all there the entire time today and found ways to impact the game in so many ways. I thought she was really, really good defensively also.

**Q. Coach, under 30 points in the first half and then over 50 in the second half. What do you think kick-started your offense in the second?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First of all, Michigan is a really good defensive team. We had to find those spots. We had to handle their pressure. I knew we'd eventually knock down some shots. I thought we got some good looks that didn't go in the first half, but really it was almost like an attitude shift for us to be the aggressors and take it at them. I thought that was a key to get going as well.



I thought we got to the free-throw line more as well because I thought we were more aggressive to get the ball where it needed to go in the paint, whether that was off the bounce or with post touches.

**Q. Seeing Sylva Swords for the first time, how did she change the game for Michigan? Also, what did you notice that was different about playing Michigan the second time this season?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's terrific. She is so good. I thought her release was quicker live than I had seen on film. But she's just a really complete player. She's a competitor.

I know that Team Canada and Michigan all think so highly of her. I saw her a ton at Lu High because we have a player from Lu High as well, but to see her at this level and come with the ability to cut and finish around the basket and a quick trigger from three, just a really, really impressive player.

**Q. Avery came up really big in a couple plays in both games. Could you kind of describe her style of play and what you see down the pike for her?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She is such a competitor. I know the shooting kind of jumps off the page, and she is a great shooter. It's one thing to put the work in practice. It's another thing to hit the shots in big games, which she does. It's that competitive fire, that competitive nature.

She's just incredibly tough. She didn't turn the ball over in 28 minutes. She obviously provides a lot of gravity for us, so we're going to get better touches for Kiki if she's on the side because you can't leave her as a shooter.

But really it's that desire and kind of killer instinct that she has that, I think, as a freshman has allowed her to be very vocal and be very confident and impact the game for us in a lot of ways.

**Q. It's been a while since you played Michigan, a couple of months. What kind of growth have you seen from all of their freshmen from high school to that game to this game? I know next year is not top of mind for you, but what can that program do with them?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I thought they were good last time. Obviously we didn't see Sylva live. I think they've been good. I think it's the consistency of excellence. I think they've won 8 out of 10 coming into this game.

They play hard. They're complete players. They can shoot

or drive it. I think the freshmen are really good, but I think we'd be remiss if we didn't talk about Jordan Hobbs and her leadership with that group and the way she plays, which I think allows those young ones to also do their thing.

I'll probably text KBA later. You say it after the game, but the moment's a very quick moment. Just I think their growth has been tremendous, and we had to win this game. It wasn't something that was given to us in any way.

They play hard and they're a really good team, and they've gotten better. Credit to Kim and her staff for getting them there and for these freshmen for really being good coming in and growing throughout the course of the year.

**Q. This team seems to go on -- kind of start the game a little slow sometimes, including this game, but it seems like they just have a will to win. What's the motivation going into the fourth quarter? What's kind of the secret to the team pulling off wins time and time again throughout the entire season?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the fourth quarter burst is a couple different things. A, I think we have elite athletes that's are in good shape, and I shout out our strength and conditioning Coach Kelly Dormandy, who I think there's nobody better. I also think our players are insanely competitive and they do have a will to win.

With JuJu and Kiki in particular, it's not just their talent, they just have a fierce, kind of competitive will about them and go ahead and make plays that you can't really script.

I think the team -- I would say many people are like that on our team -- Ken and Rayah and really our team -- and the confidence we've grown to know that with that burst of intensity and competitiveness, we still now have all the players that we need to make plays. You can't sell out on one player on our team or take away one thing.

I think the will to win has been there, and now there's probably more of a connectivity and synergy amongst the group of what it takes to get stops together and to score points together and to have just sort of some energy and athleticism at the end of the game that separates us.

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