

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs UCLA

Thursday, April 3, 2025

Tampa Bay, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

UCLA Bruins Coach Cori Close Gabriela Jaquez Lauren Betts Kiki Rice

Semifinal Pregame Media Conference

CORI CLOSE: Thank you all for being here. I think one of the coolest parts about being able to participate in this role is being able to see behind the scenes all that goes into creating an elite experience for these student-athletes.

Part of that is all of you in terms of telling their amazing stories, shining a light on their incredible journeys. I want you to know it doesn't go unnoticed and unappreciated, and our game is not in the position it is without your contributions to that.

We are expectant. This is not a surprise for us to be here. We expected and believed that we would be in Tampa. And that being said, we're really grateful, but we are ready to compete. So we're excited about that opportunity. Obviously incredible respect for the other three teams that are in this tournament and excited to match up against those.

Q. Did either of you get a chance to watch the McDonald's All-American Game? And, Lauren, what's it been like for you to have your family have this all going on at once?

KIKI RICE: I did not watch. We were on the plane while the game was going on. But saw a lot of the highlights on social media. Want to give a big shout-out to Sienna for doing such a great job and winning MVP.

It's really cool to have her coming in. And we're very excited for her and Lauren and the entire Betts family.



LAUREN BETTS: Obviously we didn't get to watch but when we landed Avary was sitting in front of me and she was like, oh, Sienna won MVP. And I had no idea. So happy for her. And the family group chat was texting all night. It's been a crazy couple past days for my family. But just super proud of her always and she's so amazing.

Q. At this point, to get to here, you get a lot of congratulations, but also a lot of distractions between texts and social media. What is the challenge of accepting that but also eliminating the noise?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I think that is a difficult part, and learning how to navigate that can be hard. But our coaches do a great job of giving us tools to handle these situations.

And I think for me personally, after we won the Elite Eight game to come to the Final Four I was really excited. I was looking at all the stuff on social media. And I'd give myself two days, and then after that I think it's time to lock in for our next opponent.

But, yeah, just try not to give too much of your attention to that because a lot of people are saying things that can piss you off, you don't agree with. They're not in our circle, so understanding that they don't know what's going on behind the scenes, in our locker room. And the people in our locker room are most important.

Q. Lauren (audio cutting out) I wanted to give you a chance to say who Lauren Betts is aside from basketball?

LAUREN BETTS: Thank you. But I always try to tell myself that I'm so much more than basketball. I think I always talk about how I really value the relationships I have with the people around me in my closed circle.

I'm a daughter. I'm a teammate. I'm a sister. I'm a friend. Just reminding myself that, yes, basketball is what I do, but it's not who I am at the end of the day. And all of this is amazing. But when I go back home to my teammates and my family, that's really what matters to me.

Q. I'm from the DMV, Kiki. I wanted to ask you specifically, what is it about that area that you think molded you as a player? And are there some favs from that area that played in this tournament and stars that you take inspiration from?

KIKI RICE: Growing up in DMV, I always say it's the best basketball area in the country. But I think just the level of competition through high school and AAU really prepared me for the next level.

I grew up going to the WCAC championship games and just seeing all the fantastic leagues there. I mean, watched a lot of players at St. John's, DeMatha on the guys' side. I think seeing that motivated me to just continue to get better. And so grateful to be from that area.

Q. Kiki, can you talk about the jump that Lauren has made this season from start to finish? And to follow, Lauren, if you could talk about the same thing, the work you've done and the pressure you've dealt with to be an elite player?

KIKI RICE: Lauren improved so much over these past few years. I think for all of us being able to see that firsthand every day in practice. And she put in so much work in the spring and offseason this summer. And I think that's where her game just really improved so much.

And I think, from the first day, in summer work outs and preseason, I could tell what a different player she was and the different confidence she had about her, because we all knew the entire time the incredible player she was. But I think a lot of it was about her realizing that.

And just being able to play with her and help alongside in that journey has been an incredible honor. She's obviously unstoppable on the court. And just very grateful to play with you.

LAUREN BETTS: To add to that, I would say kind of what Kiki said, I think it's just me finally realizing the player I am. I think a lot of it has to do with not just the basketball side but the mental work that I've done this past season.

I think just talking to Coach Shannon, having those conversations about taking away all the pressure when I'm on the floor and just playing for my teammates and understanding the moment and what I have to do, I think that's just made me the player that I am.

I mean, I think also I have to give a lot of credit to this program and the amount of confidence that they've given me and all the love that they've showed me the past couple years. I'm super grateful to be at UCLA.

Q. Kiki, I know you talked earlier this year about your relationship with Jordin Canada. What has that been like for you as you've gone through this from freshman now to junior year, she was in a similar situation -- point guard for the number one recruiting class. How has she and maybe some of the other alumni helped you kind of grow throughout this process now to the Final Four?

KIKI RICE: I think all of us sitting up here would say how impactful all the UCLA alumni have been on our journey. They've been so supportive throughout the entire year. And since we've gotten here, J.C. was someone I watched before I came to UCLA. I really have always admired her.

And just over these past few years she's been at practices, she's helped us get better, helped us prepare for games.

Now to see her watching from afar -- and she made congratulatory texts after games and certain things -- and I think having their support means a lot. Part of the reason we're in this position is because of the work that they did to build this program, and we're continuing to carry that on.

Q. Lauren, I also wanted to ask you about the ESPN story about your mental health. I was wondering if there was any particular reason you decided to do that story recently, it was published I think two weeks ago, and how you feel since sharing it? And Kiki and Gabriela, could you talk about what if any changes you've seen in Lauren since she's been more open about her mental health struggles?

LAUREN BETTS: I think one of the reasons why I wanted to come out with the story is because I felt like I was finally in the right place to do so. I think that I just had done a lot of healing since then. I was, like, you know what, I just don't feel like I have to really hide this anymore.

I think the responses that I've had since then have truly just validated what I did and what I put out. And I think the amount of love and support that I've gotten just means a lot to me.

To help young girls who, I guess, just didn't really have anyone to look up to, personally, I had mentors and I'm really thankful, but I know there's a lot of young girls who don't. I think just for me to be an outlet and to kind of validate their feelings and to know there's someone out there who is dealing with the same thing that I am is, I think, is just really important.

But I'm just really grateful for all the love and support that I've been receiving since the article. It means a lot to me.

KIKI RICE: I just think Lauren's willingness to be open about a topic that's not easy is inspiring to all of us, and I think we've all seen her grow in her confidence over these past few months. I think I've even seen another step in that over the past few weeks towards the end of the season. Just really proud of her for that.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I'm just super proud of Lauren and the way she emphasizes mental health and is an advocate for it, especially with student-athletes, because it is something super important. And being a student-athlete is very hard at times.

It's super fun. I'm super thankful. But to see Lauren just advocate for not only herself but for so many others is really inspiring. I'm just super proud of her and the way she has grown throughout her college experience and college career.

Q. Lauren, what is something that Siena is better at than you?

LAUREN BETTS: Oh, my gosh. Like in basketball or just like in life in general?

Q. Basketball.

LAUREN BETTS: I will say she's a way better shooter than I am. To be honest, I feel like for her being younger, I think she, like, is a little bit smarter than I am, too. She's genuinely one of the smartest basketball players I've ever been around. Credit to her. I don't know where she got it from.

Q. Kiki, I know you played against Azzi in high school. What kind of, from your perspective, makes her a great player? And are you looking forward to kind of matching up with her again on such a big stage? And what are you looking forward to about that match-up?

KIKI RICE: She's a great player. We played against each other a lot through the high schools. Our high schools were 15 minutes away from each other. I think she's always been a fantastic shooter, one of the best shooters I've been able to see and stuff.

And I think just grateful to have another opportunity to play against her and the UConn team. But it's really cool that both of us are from the DMV.

Q. Gabriela, so knowing that your brother, Jaime, made his own run to the Final Four in 2021, did he give you any advice on how to handle this new and big stage the Final Four?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I was grateful to watch my brother's two games in Indiana on his team's run. But he's been super busy with his own basketball games and things like that. But he's always supporting, and I just really appreciate his support.

Q. Lauren, there's players and other programs that have been to this event. This is the first time around for UCLA. You guys have been here for a few days. How do you mix business with pleasure? Do you get some time to enjoy the community? What do you think so far of what it's been like here?

LAUREN BETTS: It's unbelievable. We kind of talked about it in film, just Coach Shannon brought it up, just enjoying the moment.

Obviously we talked a lot about media and how there's going to be a lot of things going on and it will be a little hectic. But just acknowledging that we're here at the Final Four. And this is a huge deal and it's a huge accomplishment for this program.

Just having fun. I mean, we're all here together. We all love each other so much. And just to experience this together, I think, is amazing.

But yeah, we've had a lot of fun. And obviously we're also reminding ourselves at the end of the day we're here to win and it's a business trip. At the end of the day, we're here to play in the Final Four as well, but we can also just have fun and enjoy each other's company.

Q. What have you guys learned about yourself throughout this tournament?

KIKI RICE: I think our toughness and our resilience has been something that we've really worked on, and it has been on display throughout this tournament, especially in our LSU game -- our ability for so many people different to step up and hit big shots and make big plays, and just our ability to play in those close games and find a way to pull them out.

LAUREN BETTS: I would say the same thing. I think our toughness and I think our composure as well. Obviously it's a game of runs, things are going to go wrong, people are going to have fouls or be in foul trouble. But just making sure that it's next man up. And I think that just talks about the depth of our team.

Everyone's just ready and you have such a talented roster that when things go wrong we know at the end of the day we'll be okay.



GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I would add exactly what they said, but our togetherness, how powerful we are when we stay together throughout the whole game and we play for each other. So just I've had so much fun so far and I can't wait for more.

Q. I'm curious, with the transfer portal being open while you guys are still playing, what's the challenges that are presented and how do you shift your staff to accommodate?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, you know, thankfully we have more coaches now, and that makes a big difference so that we can divide and conquer a little bit more.

But, you know, I think there's two sides of this. And I saw an interview with Bruce Pearl recently, and talking about how, yes, it's very inconvenient, it's very difficult, but also having the kids be able to pursue what their next steps are is important.

I really did pause when he said that and think about the majority of the numbers. We are very fortunate this year. We don't have a lot of space. So it actually has not been very difficult for us at all because we have the potential to have almost our whole roster return.

But from a global perspective, I think there's two challenges. One is what is best for the student-athletes and what is best for our game.

The part that concerned me a little bit about the game part is how quickly coaches were trying to or athletic departments were trying to fill coaching positions so they had people in place for the transfer portal opening. I think that has been an unintended consequence of the date, which is really difficult.

So now you have assistant coaches leaving in the middle of the tournament. On top of everything else we're doing, I have people calling about your coaches and are they interested in jobs and things like that. Somehow to find a marriage of, like, okay, what is best for the student-athletes -- I think the bottom line if you're in the Sweet 16 or beyond and you need a transfer situation, there's enough people that you can accommodate.

Is it convenient? No. Is it hard? Yes. But you can do it. And especially since we're in the minority. There's only 16 teams left that are affected in that way.

But I do think the whole thing about how it affected the coaching carousel, I think that's worth a second look because that has been a major distraction and when that's

a distraction it affects the student-athlete experience. I think that's something we have to take a look at.

Q. You've often talked about being an uncommon coach. You mentioned it yesterday at the Naismith ceremony, having uncommon players. I know there's the uncommonness of UCLA being in its first NCAA Final Four, but I'm curious what is uncommon about this team that got you here?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's the hardest working team that I've ever been a part of, top to bottom. I have to kick them out all the time, of the gym. They want more. They're incredibly hardworking.

And I have to give that credit to Kiki Rice, because she has set a cultural standard of work that is contagious and pervasive. She deserves so much credit in that.

I think what else is uncommon of this group is so many players, I've never had a roster this star-studded. And it's uncommon to have this many stars be willing to give up individual things for a more powerful collective thing. Those would be probably the two most uncommon things about this particular team.

Q. I was hoping you could walk us through a little bit your relationship with Geno. I know you went to watch practices close to a decade ago, I think.

CORI CLOSE: 13 years ago.

Q. How that all happened and now you're playing them on the biggest stage, how great it was to be able to learn from the best.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, not only was it -- well, my first year at UCLA, we weren't in the NCAA Tournament. So I had a little more time on my hands after the season was over. And I'm, like, what a unique opportunity. I wonder if people would let me watch them practice.

So I called Muffet McGraw and I called Coach Auriemma and asked if I could come and watch. I spent the first and second rounds, I spent watching Notre Dame, their prep. And then I went to Connecticut and spent four days there watched them practice and prepare. It was just tremendous.

And the next year, in October, I brought my entire staff out to watch him practice. He's a master teacher. He's done it in a style of play that I really enjoy, just personally, especially on the offensive end, and trying to think about as a young, first-year coach at that point what was that going to look like for me.

It wasn't just Coach Auriemma. C.D. and their assistant coaches, their whole program, just letting someone in in the middle of the NCAA Tournament and learn, I think it's a huge credit to them.

So there used to be a joke that, whether I was at UC Santa Barbara or at Florida State and then at UCLA, every year we ended up in their bracket. That got a little old because they were really good.

But at the same time, I just think when people who have set the standard of the game are willing to reach back and teach somebody else, it goes a long way.

Q. You worked with both Paige and Azzi at the USA Basketball level. Curious what you remember working with them at that age and how you've seen them develop now as you're scouting them for a Final Four?

CORI CLOSE: It's funny, when we were in Thailand for the U-19 World Cup with Paige, she happened to be my next-door neighbor the entire time for three weeks in Thailand. Her and Celeste Taylor, I remember it, it would always be, we joked about what the pregame playlist would be. And thankfully we both like gospel music. That was usually the choice.

Paige has just got an incredible charisma. She made the pass -- to me, she's an incredibly, most efficient scorer, all those things, but her elite skill in my mind that I love the most is watching her vision and passing. It's amazing.

We were in a position in the gold medal game that she needed to make the pass for us to have a chance to send it to overtime and she made the pass and made the play and sent us on.

She's an incredible player. She's an even better teammate. And just was great to have that experience with her. Lots of respect and admiration.

Azzi, it's interesting that I had this experience with Lauren, too. Those are probably the two that, they carried me a little bit. So when I coached them, my dad died when I was on the trip with USA Basketball, and those two kids -- I remember the circle. I remember sitting there and telling them, like, this is going on. I'm okay, but this is happening. And their response to me was just tremendous.

I had recruited them both. They both turned me down.

But Azzi, she just has incredible work ethic. She's an elite player and she has a very tender heart. And I was the beneficiary of that on that trip, and I'll be forever grateful.

Q. You've been at UCLA since 2011. You were under .500 that season. If you had to go back, knowing how everything unfolded since then, what advice do you give that version of Cori Close? And what do you tell coaches who want to make that first (indiscernible)?

CORI CLOSE: Good question. I think that don't try to be all things to all people. Know what your lane is and how you operate best and be authentic to that. That's where the whole "uncommon" thing came from is that I knew I didn't want to do it like everybody else.

But it was hard. I was insecure at times. Can I really get this done? Could this really work? But I think anything other than that would have been inauthentic, and I wouldn't have had the joy or meaning, or honestly to be able to sustain, because I wouldn't have believed in it at the deepest levels, right?

The thing I would say the biggest thing is who you surround yourself. Show me the five closest people to a new head coach in the program, and I will show you what their level of success will be.

I got a lot of things wrong, but the one thing I got right is the people I surrounded myself with -- loyalty, character, trust.

I had so many people, you need this; you've been gone from California this long. You need this. Telling me what I needed.

But I knew I needed trustworthy, people of integrity, high character, hard working. I knew that I needed -- all of them, I wanted them to be able to develop talent. I wanted them to build authentic relationships. And I wanted them to be able to be able to recruit.

And everything else, I figured if those things were in place and they were high-character people, we'd be okay.

Q. Couple things you have to take care of tomorrow to be successful and to advance.

CORI CLOSE: A couple things? I think that one of the reasons I chose to learn from Coach Auriemma is that he doesn't teach just a bunch of plays; he teaches and equips his players to make plays and to read defenses.

When you're scouting them, the amount of -- it's not a lot of predictability because they're really good at read and react. It's a very high basketball IQ team.

So I think the challenges are is all the different ways they

create open 3s and the efficiency in which they do it. The number one thing we've got to do defensively is limit their 3-point attempt rate.

And it's very clear in the analytics, when their 3-point attempt rate is up, they win. When they defensive rebound, they win. Those are the two big win/loss statistics that determine their success from an analytics perspective.

So our challenge is going to be to try to limit that attempt rate, at least quality ones.

And the other thing they do is they use players as you try to extend to do that to cut behind you.

So, to be able to defend back cuts is really important because that's the counter when you take away 3s on the defensive end.

And we also have to figure out how we can play through the paint, not just with Lauren Betts, but to do that, because that's how we're built, and shoot our 3s after paint touches and not fall in love with them too much.

But the more stops we get, the more we're able to do that in transition. That will be a huge key for us playing through the paint on the offensive end. Ball movement and paint touches are the two biggest indicators for us being successful versus them on the offensive end.

Q. You're going up against a UConn program that's making their 24th appearance. It's your program's first. A lot of people might think that's an advantage for UConn in being here before, but do you feel there's an advantage on your side of your team doing something that this program's never done before and that kind of different pressure? What's that like from your perspective?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's just every -- not only is every team different in terms of their talent base and strengths and weaknesses, but their makeup internally is different.

I can't speak to theirs. Obviously their record here speaks for itself. But one of the coolest parts about coaching this team for UCLA is that they haven't been surprised. They really have prepared to win step by step, starting way back when we played South Carolina at home.

We started out just not a very confident team and just earned it little by little. I just think this is that next hurdle. We're not preparing to be here; we're preparing to win. We're trying to prepare in such a way that we have the confidence to do so.

Is it an advantage of being here multiple times? I would say, yeah, it is, probably. But there's different kinds advantages on all parts of this. I can't control that, so my job is to not give my energy to that at all.

Q. You're the number one overall seed, yet everyone's talking about UConn. That's my question, does it feel like you guys are a little bit of an underdog heading into this game even though you are the number one overall seed?

CORI CLOSE: It does, but it has sort of all year. I think we've benefited from that, honestly. We've spent more time as number one in the country all year long and we were the most non-talked-about No. 1 team in history. But I can't complain about that because I think it allowed our team to stay focused on the right things.

I do think that's sort of been the case. But I do know the No. 1 overall seed stays in the nicest hotel. That's true. That's really beneficial, right across the street.

But I think the reality is that I love the coverage of our sport. If you want to talk about whoever you want, go ahead. It's going to all shake out about who shows up to perform, who plays their best when their best is needed.

And we both two really good teams. Also, credit to them; I think they've been playing their best basketball in the last six weeks of the season. And I saw a real turn in them during that time. So they've earned some of that. And obviously their history.

But this is this year's UConn's team, not the last 10 or 20 years of UConn teams, and this is our UCLA team. And I have a lot of confidence, both mentally and physically and tactically, in this UCLA team, and I think it's going to be a great battle.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports