

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

Saturday, April 5, 2025

Tampa Bay, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

UCLA Bruins Coach Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Semifinal Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 85, UCLA - 51

CORI CLOSE: This is just never easy. Hard balance. Credit to UConn. They were the aggressors. They played more purposefully. They played more connected. They were tougher than us tonight. And they handed it to us.

That being said, we've got to learn from this. We've obviously gone to new heights this year. But we've got to let the pain of this, hopefully, teach us to go to new heights next year and learn from this and be better the next time.

Really unusual to be in this position at the Final Four and have zero seniors in your locker room and to have an opportunity to come back stronger, more connected, learning from this experience and be better the next time.

At the same time wanting to honor our team for all the firsts that they had -- how they represented UCLA on and off the court, how they took us on a ride that has never happened at UCLA in a long, long time. And just really proud of their effort, the way they grew, the new things they accomplished.

So trying to balance that we weren't our best selves tonight. And that being said, it's a three-loss season. I'm really proud of not only what they've accomplished but the way in which they've gone about their work. We'll be better next time we're here.

Q. You had 14 turnovers in the first half compared to five in the second half. And that's when UConn really grew their lead. What would you attribute those early turnovers to? Was it sort of difficult to come back



confidence-wise once they had forced so many turnovers?

KIKI RICE: I think the turnovers is really what killed us in the first half just because it didn't have shot attempts at the basket. We've always talked about this year we need the ball to score. And when you have the ball and we take care of the ball we're a really good team.

But I think it was difficult for us to get in rhythm both offensively and defensively when you're continuously turning the ball over. And they're a great defensive team.

But we just had to be stronger and tougher in those moments and just smarter. We had uncharacteristic turnovers, I felt. But we'll learn from it and get better from it.

Q. It's really rare for a team to come to the Final Four and win a title on their first try. I'm wondering now that you've been on this stage and gone through all the stuff that accompanies the Final Four, is there anything that has surprised you or that you needed to get used to this week?

LAUREN BETTS: No. I just think we need to show up more prepared and ready to win. And that has nothing to do with the coaches. That's everything to do with us. I feel, like Coach Cori said, we have the same team coming next year. I hope this fuels us and I hope that we come out angry after this.

Q. When you look at the slow start, it felt like, for lack of a better word, you guys were trying to push it. Did it feel that way? Or how would you describe, once you started slow, trying to get back into this?

KIKI RICE: I think it was just difficult for us to find a rhythm at times because of the turnovers and because we just kind of weren't in our typical flow. And I think when you play against a really good team, which every team at this level is very good at this point of the year, you've got to do the little things right. And there's not a ton of margin for error. We had too many errors today.



Q. Kiki, I know it must be tough to hear right now, a lot of emotions after that, but as Coach said, this was a season of firsts, a lot of to celebrate after the season. You wrote, we will go to a Final Four in a journal every day for a year. Could you speak of that, how proud you are of the team to make it this far. What are you going to celebrate and what will you take away from this year?

KIKI RICE: It obviously sucks right now, but I'll do my best and we'll do our best to not forget what a fantastic year this was. So many firsts in program history. To be in the Final Four and to be still playing at this time of the year is a blessing.

I think we all put in so much work to get to this point -- coaches, players, the entire support staff. And we'll remember that. And our last year will fuel us because we have a lot going forward for us. But I think, at the end of the day, we lost three games this entire year. And it sucks right now. But I think looking back we'll be very grateful for the year we had.

Q. Kiki, you guys had a timeout late in the second quarter. It was like 1:38 left. Coach called a timeout but you pulled your teammates together before the coaches could come in. What was your message there to your teammates? And for Lauren, if you could speak to Kiki's leadership and how it kind of set you guys up for next season to kind of come back after this?

KIKI RICE: Can't remember exactly what I said at that timeout. But I think I was just trying to, the entire game, to preach to our team, to settle down, calm down and enjoy it and play free because we had prepared well. And we are prepared for the moment.

But to play basketball. We know how to do this. We know how to take care of the ball. We know how to make the right reads. I think we still struggled to do that throughout the game.

But I think it's hard when we haven't been in this moment, but I still think that we're obviously a much better team than what we showed today. I think we've showed that in 30-plus games throughout the entire year.

But, yeah, I'm just trying to calm us down. And I feel that's my role in terms of vocal leadership, just to bring calmness and try to say it straight and just be clear.

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, Kiki's grown so much as a leader. I think this past season she's just really taken on that role. And that's something that she's really wanted to

work on.

I'm just really proud of her because I felt today we just needed that calming presence after they went on runs over and over and over again. I think Kiki just continued to communicate what we needed to do and just easy fixes, and I think that's what we really needed -- not so much emotion but just what do we need to do to move on get the game going our way.

I just appreciate how much she's grown. And I love playing with Kiki. I feel she helps me so much out there.

Q. Kiki, on the uncharacteristic turnovers, did you feel they were doing something that kind of forced them, or do you think that was a little bit more self-inflicted?

KIKI RICE: I think a lot of it was self-inflicted because we have played against a ton of different defenses this year. They were getting around the post while they were pressuring. But we played against teams like that throughout the year, and we figured out ways to take care of the ball.

I said this at a certain point, it's both on the passer and the receiver; we needed come to the ball. If you're receiving the pass, we needed to make strong, crisp passes if you're the one passing.

I feel like there wasn't always connection between both the passer and the receiver all the time on the court because they were just able to get in front, get hands on the ball. And they were winning the 50/50s.

Q. Lauren, number one, I've noticed what a good scorer you are and a rebounder. How much more can you build those areas and what other areas do you have to improve? The second question is the women got to the Final Four for the first time. When you look at the men's success over the years and John Wooden over the years, is this something that you guys can build on now that you've crossed Final Four territory and now look at the men's program as a way to go ahead, build a foundation for what you guys have done? And do you ever look at the men's program a little bit as a way to continue to build the UCLA basketball tradition?

LAUREN BETTS: The first question, I think me personally, I've always talked about how there's so much room to improve. Going into this postseason I'm sure Coach Shannon will look through the film and figure out how I could have done better today and the past games.

But just creating easier shots for myself where I don't have

to put the ball on the ground and bring double-teams, I think is going to be important for me. Just continuing to work on my reads, kicking out, making sure I'm finding my teammates when I need to.

To answer the second part, I have so much respect for this men's program at UCLA. I think they've really built a great foundation as far as basketball. But I think we're trying to create our own legacy.

And I think this team is one of the greatest teams to ever compete at this level. And I think that we're trying to kind of just create our own path. So to be honest right now I'm just worried about these girls that we have on this team and what we're going to do, because I know next year we're going to learn from this and come back even better.

Q. Last two years, Iowa helped take the Big Ten to a new height. The last time the Big Ten won was 1999. Obviously this is your first year with the Big Ten between you and USC. Can you talk about the impact that you guys have had on the conference so far? And obviously based on what Iowa have done over the last two years, what you guys can do as a team going forward to capitalize on that?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think it's been great to be in the Big Ten Conference this year. I think it's prepared in a lot of ways for this stage and for the NCAA Tournament. I think the competition that we face on a weekly basis is really good for us because we're just pushing every single game.

I think us and SC joining that conference, it's helped elevate the conference as well. We were the two teams that played in the Big Ten Conference championship. And we'll be great next year. SC will be great. And there will be a lot of great teams in the Big Ten.

LAUREN BETTS: I don't have much to add to that. I just think, like Kiki said, I think the Big Ten did a great job preparing us for games like this. And obviously there's just so much room for us to improve. But like Kiki said, I think it was just a really good growing process for all of us.

Q. Lauren, you mentioned being mad about the way this game went down. How do you take that and harness it to those improvements that you're trying to make? Or is that something you're still trying to figure out?

LAUREN BETTS: I was talking to Coach Shannon about it. Just taking this sadness and anger and making sure that next year, preparing for this next season, making sure we're holding the standard from the very beginning and not letting up. And just making sure that everyone's on the

same page because obviously we know what it takes, obviously, at this point. We saw.

I just think that us as leadership, we're obviously going to make sure that we bring that competitiveness every single day because that's what we need.

Q. Obviously this season just ended, but looking forward to next season and knowing you have the whole season to improve yourselves and try to get back to this position, are there specific things that you think you would work on having the experience from this season that you think would help you get back to this position next year, if that makes sense?

LAUREN BETTS: Go ahead, Kiki, I'll let you go first.

KIKI RICE: I think just continuing to build in our toughness, I think that's an area where we improved a lot in the past offseason. And we'll get better individually, skill-wise, and collectively, and the sets we run and all that kind of stuff.

And I think at this stage it really comes down to just executing small things and being a tougher, more together team. And having this experience will show us that we need to be ready when we come to play these games. I think that will help us all going forward.

LAUREN BETTS: To add to that, I would just say I think our urgency and our competitiveness, I think we kind of lacked that a little bit today, just recognizing that this is the Final Four and our season is on the line. So we really need to recognize the moment that we're in and play like it. We need everybody to show up that way.

Q. It seemed like the team was out of sorts from the very beginning compared to what we've seen in previous games. Was there something in particular that you can point to that kind of explains why that seemed to be the case tonight?

LAUREN BETTS: I think they were just tougher in the beginning. I mean, I think that's the only way I can put it. I think they just played with -- they just played more together.

And we knew that UConn was going to run their sets really well. That's what they do. I think as a team we talked about it in the timeout, just defensively just coming out with a lot more aggression, and making it harder on them. I feel we just let them do whatever they wanted out there, from the very beginning.

KIKI RICE: I would agree with what Lauren said. I think in a way we were kind of looking for things to just settle in

and for things to come to us. And I think we needed to go out and take the game and to go make plays, not have plays happen to us.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. You played South Carolina earlier this season. You know how good you guys have been all season. How good is this UConn team?

CORI CLOSE: Really good. And they've been playing really well the last six weeks of the year. You can tell there's a level of connectivity and purpose that they're playing with.

They have so many players that are being stars in their roles. And obviously we talk about Paige and Azzi and Sarah, but the reality of how their whole team is contributing in different ways, it's a credit to them.

And obviously -- some of that has to do with match-ups. We match up a little bit better with some of the things that South Carolina does and allows us to keep our bigs and our length, which is our strength, home in the paint, where UConn really spread us out and those kinds of things.

It's not apples to apples between those two teams, but credit to the way they played as a team with great toughness and purpose tonight and exposed where we didn't.

Q. You only lost three games, but you only lost to one program because you made it up the other way. But to be a scout Sunday between the two of them, because you had great success, which propelled you to the top in the one, what do you see on Sunday between the two teams?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's such contrasting styles. So I think that the reality of who can play to that better. Most teams you really want to be able to either be able to shoot the 3, which we did a better job, I thought, limiting that -- I don't know how many 3s, they shot 16 and made seven of them. That's less than their normal 3-point attempt rate is higher than that.

But they're going to spread South Carolina out. And can they shoot 3s and then get layups through that? But the thing that makes UConn is how good they are at the mid-range. They truly are efficient at all three levels, which very few teams are at the rate that they do it.

But I think what you saw tonight is credit them for their defense. We talk about their efficiency on their offense. But I think their defense is -- they scramble. They were

coming from double teams and running us off the line on inside/out passes. Nobody has closed like that with us this year.

And I think that's one of the things we're going to learn from. But I think it's just so dramatically two contrasting styles that whoever can get the game to be played the way they like it is probably going to win.

Q. If you could talk a little bit more about how you guys are set up hopefully for next year to hopefully take that next step. You've said you have zero seniors, unfortunately in this day and age of transfer portal, if someone decides to go somewhere, but if some decide to come back, how much experience can help you with that group?

CORI CLOSE: I tried to talk to people about what it's like for the first time trying to get wisdom from people who came before me. The reality is you have to go experience it.

And I'll go back with my staff and say, okay, what did we learn, what did this teach us. I've heard it from so many people, that until you go through it, it's a different level of compartmentalization, all the things that are surrounding it, and trying to be ready to play your very best basketball in a way you haven't probably prepared like this all year long.

Definitely I'll be a better leader next time I'm in this situation. It's my responsibility to learn from this and to help us win as much as anyone.

But I do think, you know, experience is such a powerful teacher, if you allow it to. I use this quote I got from Tony Bennett a long time ago, I use it with our team all the time: Adversity, if used correctly, can buy you a ticket to a place that maybe you wouldn't have gone otherwise.

I think in other areas we have really done that. This is our next area.

We got exposed. We got out-toughed. We got our butts beat today. And it stings right now. And may the pain of that regret and this loss buy us a ticket, if handled well, buy us a ticket to be better the next time hopefully we get this opportunity.

Q. As you walk out of here tonight, will you, without looking at the film, will you remember this game for what UConn did? You talked about how well they move without the ball. Or will you look at, no, we didn't execute?

CORI CLOSE: Both. I think there's -- to not live in that

tension of both of those things would be either not holding ourselves accountable or not giving the credit to UConn appropriately.

They played really, really well. They're a really good team. They earned that win. And we could have given them a better game. We could have executed our game plan better. We could have played with better toughness and togetherness. We say it all the time: Most of the time the tougher, more together team wins. That wasn't us.

We have to learn from that. We've got to acknowledge that. And we've got to -- every person, that may look different for different people. I'll look at myself first, but every person, what was our body language like? How did we respond to adversity? How many mistakes did we make in the game plan in the first five minutes and why is that? Because we've not been that team.

And we've been in a lot of big moments. So trying to figure all that. But I think it's both. It's appropriate to give credit to how well UConn is playing. And it's also appropriate that I hold us to the standards that I know we're capable of.

Q. Obviously this is definitely not what you wanted and it sucks but hearing people take accountability, yeah, we're going to be better, what kind of confidence does it give you for next season?

CORI CLOSE: Huge. It's interesting, when we have clearer heads, we'll be able to look back and think about all the moments, the growth, the remember-when.

But we only have three rules in our program. And one of those is respect and represent. Respect the opportunities that we have and make sure that we represent our university, our team, our families with class and dignity. And that we have a growth mindset all the time.

I was sitting here sort of like a proud parent in this way, that when you have these incredibly capable, talented, driven and disappointed women, for them to lead in the way they do, I feel very blessed to be their coach.

We say all the time in our program -- and some people will say this sounds like it's less competitive, but it's actually the opposite.

There's only two things that are going to stay with these women for the rest of their lives from these four years. In the end, I'm going to have a relentless quest to raise a banner in Pauley Pavilion and an absolutely driven mindset to figure out how to learn from this and be better next time -- and banners hang in gyms and rings collect dust.

But who you become and who you impact you get to keep forever. I'm very proud of who Lauren and Kiki have chosen to be in this case and many others in that locker room, and who they've chosen to impact through their platform and what they've done. And their families and our university are very proud of that. And that they get to keep together.

Q. So much to celebrate this season. What has this season meant for you, (indiscernible) basketball, this legacy in general. I was speaking to Denise Curry this week. She said you and your coaching staff have built this program where players like Janiah and Timea, who could start on a lot of other programs, choose to come to UCLA because of the culture you've built. And with the success you've had this season what does it mean for the legacy you're creating?

CORI CLOSE: We built it together. It's a testimony by all those people that are, and Denise, they went to back-to-back Final Fours in the AIAW era and won the national championship in 1978.

You could be jealous or you could be like, oh, those guys, they don't know how good they have it. But they haven't been. Half of that team that were there in the stands tonight. I was walking out of the hotel and the amount of alumni that made the trip there that were cheering us on and sent us a video today, I think we don't do that alone. But I think our culture is built on doing something bigger together than you could do on your own.

Timea and Janiah are great examples of that. They've chosen to be a part of something that the whole is bigger than the individual parts. But in the end, everybody wins. Nobody's Final Four rings look any different, no matter what your role is. I think, actually, credit to UConn. I think that they have a great spirit in that that everybody's role is so important.

I think Paige does a great job of honoring everybody's role in that. But the reality for us is that it is about teaching, mentoring and equipping young women for life after the ball goes flat. But the great thing about it is that, when you make those kind of choices in growth, it makes you a pretty good dang basketball team too.

Q. You and your staff are going to get together, and you have a building block, you're so good that you can potentially use NIL and the transfer portal to your advantage because your basketball program is incredible. Football has a little bit of work to do. But I'm not knocking the football program, I just know basketball and UCLA go hand in hand. How much are you going to be able to use that to convince other

people to come here? And then the second part of that question, I know the college coaches, men and women's alike, usually get along really well. Do you think at some point you'll reach out to Geno Auriemma and try to pick his brain a little bit and see how Cori Close can build as a coach, because it seems like the respect I've seen in the last couple of days between you two has been nothing short of dynamite.

CORI CLOSE: I've been really fortunate that both Dawn Staley and Geno Auriemma that are in the finals have been good to me, been willing to share ideas, willing to grow the game and take off their institutional hat for the sake of growing and investing in others and helping our game grow together.

So I think that I want to be known as a consummate learner. That's my responsibility, is to get better every year. They're obviously at the top of their game. I will continue to do so.

But I have already. I just want to learn from whoever I can all the time. So that's my responsibility as a leader.

What was the first part of your question? NIL. We've been really able to leverage that, because not only do we have some great corporate sponsorship and team deals of true NIL that has been really helpful to us, but we're in the number one media market in the United States.

We've been really the beneficiary of that. There's a lot of challenges, and we're in a very transitional time with rev share coming and how that's all going to work and clearinghouse and so on and so forth. I won't bore you with the details.

But we're really committed to lead in that space and to try to stay mission-minded at the same time. That's really the challenge is that, you know, comparison is the thief of all joy and money can really hold people back from a growth mindset.

So my job is to provide opportunity, because I love that women are finally walking in greater opportunity, both financially as well as exposure, and all the things that we're seeing in the growth of our game.

But in the end, just making a lot of money and having a lot of comparisons, it's going to slow your growth and steal your joy.

So my job is to try to leverage opportunity and maximize opportunities while still staying mission-minded and pouring into their hearts first.