

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Southern California vs South Carolina

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

Southern California Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

Laura Williams

Kennedy Smith

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: First up the Southern California Trojans. The women of Troy are represented today by head coach Lindsay Gottlieb and student-athletes Kennedy Smith and Laura Williams.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thanks for being here today. We're obviously grateful to be continuing our journey and still playing in March. The best type of lack of sleep is March Madness lack of sleep. Glad to be prepping for a really excellent South Carolina team.

Just looking forward to more time with our team and a great battle tomorrow night. Excited to be getting to practice with our team and marching on.

Q. For both of you, this is the second time you'll play South Carolina. Just kind of what sticks out about their style of play, about a Dawn Staley team?

KENNEDY SMITH: I think South Carolina is very good in transition. They feed off their transition and rebounding, getting out quick. That's something we have to contain going into this game. Obviously we watched film from last time we played them, so just making adjustments and going from there.

LAURA WILLIAMS: Going off of that, we kind of have to be intentional about the mistakes we made last time, and just being more solid understanding the scout and doing what we know we can do to stop what they're good at.

Q. Kennedy, the last time you played South Carolina it was the third game of the season, this team was in a



totally different place. What do you remember and what emotions do you remember about the last time you guys played?

KENNEDY SMITH: I would say the emotions are kind of the same. It's always good to play against the best competition in the tournament and in regular season. I think that game was good for us to build for us to grow.

Obviously our team like a couple months ago wasn't the same as it is right now, so just building off of that.

Q. Kennedy and Laura, you guys obviously the last NCAA Tournament, you lose such a player like JuJu. A lot of teams might not be able to rebound, but here you are preparing for a run at the Sweet 16. Now, how did you guys keep together and just keep focused on what you wanted even after losing her?

KENNEDY SMITH: JuJu obviously is a great player, but I think Lindsay did a great job of building off that, bringing in Kara and Londynn. I think people have to get better over the off-season. A lot of roles have changed and grown from that, including mine.

So just coming in and being intentional with sticking to the main goal, which is winning a National Championship.

LAURA WILLIAMS: I agree with what she said. Everyone has kind of had to step up. Losing a player like JuJu, everyone had to step up into a new role, whether it's being a leader or doing what you can for the team.

Obviously me coming into the season from being hurt and just kind of figuring out where I can contribute to the team to get to where we are right now.

Q. Laura and Kennedy, how have you seen Jazzy kind of develop, not just as a player, but also as a leader this season? It seems she's a little more talkative, a little more outgoing. How have you seen her develop in that way?

LAURA WILLIAMS: Of course coming in as a freshman, it's kind of like maybe nerve-racking even knowing your



talent coming in as a freshman, you're coming into a team of people who have been here before.

Just stepping in, she probably didn't want to overstep or anything, but when she got comfortable in her role and found her rhythm in the game, I'm sure she felt more comfortable talking to us. I know us as a team we're very receptive to a lot of feedback. Especially as teammates, we're really close. So as soon as she got comfortable, it was easy for her to communicate with us and talk.

KENNEDY SMITH: I've definitely seen her confidence grow on and off the court, especially on the court like being more vocal, like you kind of harped on. I think she's a very important role, like a person for this team. So the way that she's able to use her voice as a freshman -- I mean, for me it wasn't easy. So for her to come in and using that role is something that we obviously look up to.

Q. Just to follow up, when a player that talented comes into a team, it can either unite the team or disrupt it a little bit. How did she unite you guys when she showed up and throughout the season?

KENNEDY SMITH: She's just a great player. She does a lot for us. Defensive wise, she's very handsy on defense, as well as offensively she can get to the basket, create shots, throw up some scores. I think her ability to create and create for others as well is something that is helping our team. We're kind of building off of that and growing off that.

LAURA WILLIAMS: She's just a really good all around player. So it was easy for her to kind of come in and make an impact immediately because she kind of could touch on any area that we needed help with.

Q. Obviously you didn't finish the regular season as you hoped, kind of slumped a little bit towards the end. Obviously if you hadn't won yesterday, you wouldn't be here. How important is it from a confidence standpoint just to get back in the win column, just in your locker room to be able to celebrate a win again after losing a few at the end of the season?

LAURA WILLIAMS: It's definitely a big confidence booster just to see we know that we can do it and it's just a matter of sticking to it and never letting up in the fight and just showing ourselves we are capable of doing it.

KENNEDY SMITH: I think this season we had a lot of ups and downs, but all of our losses were something we could learn from and grow from. Each loss had a lesson we could take from it. Now that we're here, I think all those mistakes and stuff that we made in the beginning of the

year kind of helped us to win our game yesterday.

Finishing out an overtime game, playing more minutes than you would obviously because overtime is five more minutes, but yeah.

Q. Lindsay, you've obviously delved more into South Carolina now. What have you seen since -- out of them now that maybe you didn't see back when you played them in November?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think they've evolved, just like anyone else has. I think, when you start out that elite, to find ways to evolve speaks to the coaching. I think obviously Dawn's an incredible coach and they have great leadership on the floor.

I think their core principles remain the same, right? They're an incredibly athletic team. They have dominant bigs. They like to rebound. They have an elite point guard who involves people, and then they obviously have guards who can score. They literally gained a player, so they gained some more depth with Tournebiz -- is that how you see it? I want to make sure I pronounce it correctly.

Also, they've continued to evolve. Okot has improved and obviously showing more range. It's hard to believe that Joyce Edwards is only a sophomore, so she has, I think, expanded her game.

But I think the core of what they do and who they are remains the same. They've been through battles just like we have. They've now been through an SEC season, so I'm sure they've learned things about themselves as well.

Q. You sort of alluded to it yesterday, but I know Rex Greabell, your video coordinator, has been so important to you this season. Can you walk us through what a conversation was like with him with that final play?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: The conversations during the game are short and to the point. Most of it has revolved around challenges. It's funny, I feel like I had a little head start being in the NBA. We had this savant of a video guy in the NBA. He actually texted me last night saying great win. We would just turn to him.

In the NBA, every guy thinks they never foul. So they want to review everything. You look at your video guy, and you have whoever, some famous NBA player saying review, and the video guy is like, no, that was a foul. In the moment you have to say yes or no.

So with Rex, I would turn and look. We can only review

out of bounds calls. I'll look at him quickly, and he'll say yes or no. I trust him, I think he's got like almost a 100 percent success rate. So last night as soon as that play happened, I just turned and looked to him, and I said, did it beat the clock? He said, I don't think so. It actually changed my whole demeanor. I was able to -- obviously there was a chance that I heard the opposite news, but I was kind of able to be calm in the huddle and say this thing's going to overtime. We need to get ready.

The foul thing was what was a little more dicey there. Obviously his ability to look and say honestly I think it was after the clock just allowed me to coach the team. That's what a great staff and a great support staff does. They set up everything so the players can play, and they set up everything so I can do my job.

So he's really elite at what he does, and that was really helpful in that moment.

Q. Were you familiar with the stop watch aspect of it?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: No, I learned, just as obviously Clemson's staff learned -- they're trying to get it right. So I do think in this instance they got it right. I did take a couple moments last night -- everything in coaching, I think, is from your own perspective, what we did do, what we didn't do. Just to take a moment for another team who thinks they win the game and then to go back -- you know, it's a human game, and I can imagine that is incredibly difficult. But you want them to get it right.

No question the shot obviously didn't leave her hand before the timing, and there's maybe some rulings that say it's not even when they blew the whistle on the foul, it's when the foul occurred. Then there's the timing thing. So if the clock didn't start -- it's just they want to get it right. I wasn't completely familiar, but now I am.

I think they went to the stopwatch to make sure they got it right. As hard as it is to have such a close call either way, you want to get it right, and I think they did. We had to win the game in the next five minutes, and our players were able to do that.

Q. A lot of coaches have different philosophies on sort of creating a nonconference schedule and strength of schedule and everything like that. I know it was announced a year ago at this point, but just how important is it that the sort of two elite teams are playing in nonconference with home and home South Carolina-Southern Cal series.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think my philosophy -- and obviously building USC and trying to get to a National

Championship contender and being one of the elite teams in women's college basketball, I've studied it for years, the best teams play each other in nonconference.

So when Geno called and said, you want to do a home and home? I said yes. I think I called Niele at Notre Dame, and said do you want to do a home and home? Then the following year there was an opportunity to do the same with South Carolina. So we're not going to shy away from that.

Obviously there was some change just in terms of thinking this was a year we'd have JuJu in her junior year and then not, but you're never going to be sorry to play the best teams. Maybe if we hadn't played Notre Dame and UConn and South Carolina, maybe our record would be a little better coming in, but it doesn't make you a better program.

Our goals remain the same, which is to be a National Championship team. If you're skipping those people in the nonconference hoping to manipulate, it doesn't work that way. You have to see the best, you have to elevate your program to be the best, and then you ultimately have to beat the best to get where you want.

Yeah, it's been very intentional with how we've built this program and the schedule, and you hope that over time people are trying to schedule us because we're that team as well.

Q. We saw Jazzy out there with what looked like a compression sleeve on her right upper arm last night. Can you disclose exactly what her injury was, where she's at in the recovery process, and just how she's feeling?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Did you see the Big Ten Tournament? There was the injury from the Big Ten Tournament. She had a shoulder injury that happened early in the Big Ten Tournament. She had to leave the game and was never really the same after that. So there was an injury to her shoulder.

Got full clearance to play, but the rest helped her in the off time, and the rehab continues. She looked pretty okay last night, I think, but yeah, she's a really tough kid. I don't think anything was going to keep her from playing. She continues to just deal with a shoulder thing.

Q. You mentioned South Carolina added Tournebize midseason, you also added Sitaya, but she's not playing. Both are international players. You have several other international players. What is it about international players in the last few years that has made them so attractive as recruits?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Basketball is such a global game, and it's really fun to watch different styles of play and our game grow across the world. I don't think it's a new thing that there's really good basketball being played internationally.

I do think it's always been when you recruit internationally some players grew up wanting to come to the U.S. and go to college, and some never had that notion. Or maybe in certain countries they go right to being pros and it's not really a thing to come over here.

Maybe there's some additional incentives to come because the NIL rules now, but for us, we always go to the FIBA International tournaments. We always try to recruit the best in the United States and then look to see who might be a fit for us if it's an international prospect as well.

For us, Sitaya is young, and in Australia, their seasons are literal seasons. Winter and summer are different. So high school ends -- the way ours ends in the spring, theirs ends in winter. So at 17 years old she graduated from high school, and a lot of Australians will go right to that pro league and NBL 1 and then come over. But she was committed the entire time, I think, to using that extra semester to start early but not burn the year and train and become part of the culture.

It's been incredibly valuable for her and for us to have her here. Like I said, she's still 17 years old and reaping all the benefits of kind of this redshirt time. I know the young woman at South Carolina, it's a different path. She came and played right away and has integrated really well given how difficult that must be.

Q. Your players were talking earlier about how roles had to change with JuJu's injury and things like that. Coaches always say it's next person up. That's not always easy to do, I would imagine. Did you and your staff kind of help accelerate the process? Did JuJu herself help her teammates kind of understand that things had to change in a different way because of what we're doing?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: There's obviously no next person up when you're referring to JuJu, right? She's one of one. She got hurt in the NCAA Tournament last year. We had a team that had played together for an entire year, and then a devastating injury happens, and in that moment you're not reconstructing a team, you're not reconstructing an offense. You're trusting that a lot of other really good players as well and try to keep people in the roles they had and just breathe life into what they were capable of.

We won a Sweet 16 game against a great team and had, I believe, the closest game with UConn in the tournament on the run to a National Championship. So that was a very quick kind of, hey, let's make sure we're putting everyone in a situation to succeed and take our best shot. I think that team really did that admirably.

We went into the season knowing we were going to not have JuJu. So I had to, like Kennedy said, roster construct around that. We added players that we knew could help us, and we did different things to play to this team's strengths and to try to get this team ready.

I don't think any of us allowed us to lower the standard, but we also didn't really reference JuJu in terms of, oh, if we had her. We knew she wasn't going to be available on the court in that capacity. But I will say her value to this team has been incredible this year with what she is able to do. She can't play -- you know, I mentioned this the other day, like her willingness and ability to pour into other people. You see her on the bench.

It's also authentic. None of it is a show. It's who she is. So she's poured into the team, and the team has, again, to their credit, tried to be this USC team with the pieces that we have and maximize what we're capable of doing, and a chance to get to the second weekend is something that we were hunting for. Now we have it, and that's what we're going to try to do.

Q. Just curious, playing in South Carolina you're going to be going up against a Dawn Staley team who's a big proponent of not just women's basketball, but women's sports. How excited are you for that, and just what do you have to say about Dawn Staley and her impact on women's basketball?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, that is exactly it, right? What I admire the most is her ability to transcend just South Carolina women's basketball. She's iconic for women's sports. She's iconic for African American coaches. She's iconic for female coaches.

I think what I've learned the most by watching -- I don't know her all that well. Obviously, we're professional colleagues, and I can call her and things like that. But what I really admire from my seat is that continued ability to see the big picture and advocate for our sport and advocate for women and advocate for African American women in this sport. I think it's really incredible. When you're still fighting for your own goals, right -- she's trying to win games and trying to win championships -- but to do that and empower other people along the way, I think is pretty unbelievable.

Q. I just want to go off what you said right there because in the NBC documentary on JuJu, she said her final two choices were South Carolina and Southern Cal. In that moment when you lose the No. 1 recruit, like Dawn could have said, okay, bye, but she sort of maintained this relationship and really elevated JuJu in an honest way and not in a transfer portal poaching way, just uplifting your team. As a coach, how cool is that to see an opposing coach still maintain that respectful relationship with one of your players?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think it speaks to like just the security level. I think Dawn seems super secure in who she is and what she's built. To me it's -- you know, to get where I'm trying to get in my career, to recruit people who choose our school over them, it means something. But then also to see how she handles, if you don't get a player, you still obviously elevate people and treat them the right way. I definitely think she embodies that.

I know she's been somebody that JuJu has felt has been a positive influence or person regardless of which school she chose, and I think that speak, again, to being really secure in what she's done. Like that's just a really admirable way to look at things.

Q. I asked you the other day about Wendale, and I wanted to follow up on that. If I'm not mistaken, you hired him twice. What is it you like so much about him as an assistant coach?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I'll tell you one funny story, and it kind of relates to your question. We lost in the Elite Eight last year, and it's the hardest possible time to lose. I was still processing JuJu's injury. It's a week sooner. I came back and said I'm just going to take one day and take my kids to Disneyland. It was the Thursday before the Final Four game.

Why are you laughing?

Q. I think I know where you're going.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I was with my kids at Disneyland. My son, as I told you, is a little bit of a savant with all of this stuff. I put my phone through the thing that goes into the metal detector at Disneyland. Literally my son went in right before me, and he's looking at my phone. He goes, mommy, Dawn Staley's calling you. I'm like, no, she's not. He goes, no, mom, Dawn Staley is calling you. Oh, she sure is. She's at the Final Four.

So it went to voicemail, and in that phone call she said, number one, just sending my thoughts to JuJu. Obviously

that had just happened. And then hey, I don't know if you know but I have a coaching opening, I want to talk to you about Wendale. So just kind of an interesting story about a year ago.

He's a terrific human, first and foremost, and I think just has all the right priorities in life. Came from a place where he had to struggle to get exactly where he is and always thinks about giving back. Had an incredible mother that was really influential in what he's done, and I think he has a servant's heart, does a ton of community service when nobody's looking.

And I think he's just poured his life into women's basketball, studies the Xs and Os and finds creative ways to relate with players, and he's just a great guy.

Q. Obviously you guys play in L.A. It's a tough town with a lot of other -- with LeBron and Shohei and a lot of 1A stars. Tomorrow you're going to be in here and there will be 18,000 people screaming and yelling for women's basketball. Is it possible for the same thing to happen for you? Is there a level --

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: You need to come out to L.A. Have you seen our games?

Q. I have not been at your games, no.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Look, when I took the job at USC, the knock was exactly what you said, no one's going to come. People told me, oh, don't even try -- at the time in the Pac-12 we played on Friday nights. Don't even try for the Friday night games, just try for the Sunday games.

I had recruits not named JuJu who didn't necessarily believe in the vision who said, well, this other team gets more fans. Now we have Snoop Dogg and Michael B. Jordan and Jason Sudeikis and Cheryl Miller and Candace Parker sitting courtside, it's definitely a vibe, and we have lines around the block.

I walked into one of our games a couple years ago against UCLA, and there wasn't a seat, and I got chills. Now, we don't have 18,000 every -- our place doesn't even hold 18,000. We don't have it sold out every single game. It's not anything to take away from South Carolina's fans, but what we've been able to build in a short time at USC is pretty spectacular because women's basketball matters. I think it's more commentary on that that we do have LeBron and Luka and Shohei, and people show up for women's basketball because our players are fun and they're exciting and it's great.

South Carolina fans have figured that out several years



ago, and they come. I think for us it's one of the hottest tickets in town. Obviously with JuJu's return next year, I think maybe it will be every single game, we'll see. Yeah, I don't think our players are going to be surprised to have all those fans. It's a great thing. It's great all the way around, but I don't think it's going to be something brand new for us.

Q. Coach, we can't let you get off the dais without talking about what you've learned the last few days about the offensive efficiency of Joyce Edwards.

(Laughter).

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I'm still studying the third through fifth grade project over there. Yeah, math and the numbers and basketball all fits together. We've got to box out. We've got to box out. Keep them off the boards. That's important.

Q. By the way, I looked at that clip, and it was adorable. After a physical, long game yesterday, what does practice look like today? Is it a regular practice? Do you just mental reps?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Not a lot of physical things for our players with the highest load. Yeah, some walk-through stuff, some mental stuff, some adjustments, and then some good work for people who need that maybe who weren't quite as high minutes.

We're kind of used to recovery and the mental side of things. Our players are not unfamiliar with that, so it will be more of that kind of day.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports