

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Alabama vs Louisville

Monday, March 23, 2026

Louisville, Kentucky, USA

KFC YUM! Center

Louisville Cardinals

Coach Jeff Walz

Tajianna Roberts

Elif Istanbuluoglu

Laura Ziegler

Media Conference

Louisville 69, Alabama 68

JEFF WALZ: I first want to congratulate Coach Curry and Alabama on just a great basketball game. It obviously could have gone either way. I thought they competed right until the end. They had some players, Ace Austin came in and, for a freshman, was phenomenal. Made every big shot they needed there in the first half. We got, I think six or seven in the first half, and then she hits back to back threes.

Give Karly Weathers just a pat on the back, as well. I thought she played a great basketball game.

It was just one of those where we played well enough to win. Obviously our free-throw shooting was very poor. But we made a couple there at the end when you had to in order to give us a little bit of ground with the way they made that last three and then we step up and, with us missing the first one, we missed the second one on purpose with 2.5. I thought it was in our best interest to miss it and not give them the opportunity to set up a play to throw it down the floor.

If she makes that shot, it's a tough way to lose, but I thought the odds were more favorable to do that. We actually tried to foul on the three that Weathers made there, but we weren't successful at doing that.

But what a basketball game by Taj, E and Laura, the three here. Just really proud of them. And then Mac, seven offensive boards again. Just absolutely an unbelievable



effort. Just excited to still be playing with this group.

Q. Taj, you had a big steal there. Knowing your journey this year and how much you've talked about growing and evolving other parts of your area, how nice is it to be in this situation now and nice to see those areas come along in moments where you need it?

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I think it was great. At halftime we harped on getting stops. We needed to get stops. Offensive wasn't the issue. So to come up with a big possession right there, the 50/50 balls when we needed it, I just wanted to get in the passing lane because we talked about we need stops, we need stops.

I think I just had an opportunity to get a hand in there, and the ball went in the air and E got that 50/50 ball, so it was great.

Q. Laura, when you reflect on your decision to come to Louisville, how did you imagine it playing out, and how similar is it to what you're going through right now?

LAURA ZIEGLER: You're going to make me cry again. I think as you're nearing your college career end, you just reflect a lot, and it makes me very emotional because when I look over all my four years, I just had an amazing time. I am extremely grateful for the three years at St. Joe's. That's a wonderful program. Hawk Hill is a wonderful place. I am extremely grateful that Coach Walz brought me here for my last one.

Transferring is difficult; you want to get it right. I had one last time, and I think I got so focused on trying to find a perfect match, which is difficult, but I think -- I just believed in the vision. When he was talking, I loved talking to him, to Coach Butler, I spent a lot of time talking to her, too, and I ended up in the right place in my last year. I've learned so much this year. I've grown so much. I've had all the right people around me to do so. So I'm just extremely grateful for all my four years, but this year it's been amazing.



I think I'm so lucky. A lot of people struggle to find the right places, and I just hit home twice. I'm just lucky and very grateful for all the people.

JEFF WALZ: We're all grateful, believe me. It's been some ups and downs, but if you're trying to coach someone and help them reach the goals that they want to reach, it's not always just smiles and hugs. Sometimes you have to challenge them, and Laura, I can't say she wanted me to all the time, but I think we both have grown a ton. I've got a tremendous amount of respect for her, not just the way she plays the game, but the work she has put into it, and then the growth that she's made because she's going to have an opportunity to have a career after this, and that's one of her things that she really wants to do, and there's no doubt in my mind that she's going to be able to.

It's been a great year, and that's the one thing with the portal. She has brought so much to our team with just her leadership, her experience, and it's been a wonderful year, and I'm glad we're getting at least one more weekend to see what we can do.

Q. Elif, coming in, you know the standard that this program has and what's happened the past two years. For you having experienced both of those first round, second round and now being able to go to the Sweet 16, what does it mean to be a part of this and get Louisville hopefully another Sweet 16 streak started?

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I feel amazing. Yeah, my freshman year, sophomore year, definitely first round, second round, and coming here today, I knew, it's not going to happen again. I felt like I learned my lesson, and I think everybody in the team learned from the past, and I'm like, okay, we're going to set the tone today.

Again, it was a home game, and we got a couple problems in the season, but I feel like today we didn't think about that at all. We were mentally ready, and physically, and we didn't struggle this time. Yeah, Sweet 16.

Q. Imari had a tough day. She was missing shots and made some turnovers. But in the end she had a huge steal and then hit those two free throws down the stretch. Talk about her resilience to fight through a bad day.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I mean, it's for everybody. We can have a bad day. Our shot is not going to go in. But I feel like what matters is our teammates, the energy, who's next to me and giving me high five, come on, you got it, the slaps.

I think we did a great job picking Imari up. We're going to

have ups and downs sometimes, shots aren't going to go in; it happens. I think she didn't quit. Like okay, the ball didn't go in, next possession and she was ready to steal that ball. She knows how important that next play is, and I think she was mentally ready to, okay, they didn't go in, my shots aren't going in, but she was mentally ready to steal the next pass. Next-play mentality.

LAURA ZIEGLER: I think the thing about Imari is she's a baller. She's got that feel for the ball that you can't teach. You either got it or you don't. She just has it. Like sometimes when she does things with the ball, we all say she does some crazy things, but she makes it work, and she makes the people around her better.

I think today one thing that changed when they came out of time-out and we were running a player for a pick-and-roll for a pull-up and the whole team was like, Imari shooting, Imari shooting. She hadn't made a shot at that point, but everyone was like, she's going to make the next one because that's what Imari does. She makes big shots when we need it.

I think she struggled today, but she always brings it -- Imari is somebody who always brings energy. You can always lean on. When I've struggled this season I leaned on Imari to bring that energy. She's only a sophomore, but she's an everyday person. She's somebody you want on your team anytime.

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I second all of that.

Q. Laura, you talked about your experience this year. What about the crowd today for a noon game and the way they were?

LAURA ZIEGLER: I was running around before the game doing warmups. I got a little late because I was running around wanting to say thank you to everybody because I knew it's a noon game, it's a Monday and it's difficult. But we had a great crowd. We always have a great crowd.

They're always there for us. They always show up. I appreciate playing in front of this crowd this year so much. They took me in right when I got here, made me a part of the family right away.

It's just amazing. I think we're just all grateful. We're grateful we could give them a win for the last home game this year.

Q. Laura, you brought back the floor slap today and then had a block right after that. What is it about that that got you juiced up?

LAURA ZIEGLER: I told Taj, I got that block because of the floor slap. I just think Coach Walz told me today before we started the game, he's like, have some fun out there, and I think I just took that in, knowing, again, my last game at the Yum! Center, and I wanted to bring the energy today, I wanted to have fun today. I wanted to give the crowd something, the ones who showed up, and I wanted to give that energy to my teammates because, as we all know, you never know if you're going to have a good day and you're going to make shots. But I knew I needed to bring the energy today and have people feed off of that.

I love to floor slap. I think be ready. When we do it, hey!

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: I was ready. I was with you out there.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: I did it by myself one time. I was like, what?

LAURA ZIEGLER: That's what I did. I'm doing it every possession now.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Taj told me, she started laughing in the middle of the game -- like never mind.

Q. For all of you, what was going through your mind after the buzzer sounded, and take me through the celebrations. I know you somehow ended up with a flag and running around. Laura, I know you were very emotional.

TAJIANNA ROBERTS: Yeah. I think we had all the feels. I think for one, because we've been put in this situation for so many games, and we came on the short side of it all of those games.

To be at home in front of the crowd, in the same situation that we've been in all season, for me I think that was the best feeling is that we finally got over that hump and we overcame it.

We executed and we followed the game plan when we needed to the most, and we've been working all week on end-of-game situations, and I think we finally came over that hump and we did what we needed to do.

I think this is my first time going to the Sweet 16, all of our first times, so I think the feeling of, we're still dancing, we're still playing basketball, it's a great feeling. I think it's just so special, and for us to do it in front of such a great fan base, I think that was amazing, as well.

LAURA ZIEGLER: I wish I could say all the smart things Taj said because I was just thinking, don't cry, don't cry,

don't cry. But I think what she said, it was a relief getting that win, getting on the home court and just getting to celebrate.

I think getting to celebrate with all your teammates that you love, that's just an amazing feeling. Every athlete knows that.

ELIF ISTANBULLUOGLU: Like an emotional roller coaster. I was relieved and I was so happy and I started crying. But winning the second-round game in front of your fans, last home game, I think it's special. I feel like at that moment, I was like, ah, finally.

Q. I guess after kind of sweating through some other games with missed free throws, you get a couple when you need them, and you all come up with key plays. What did you tell your team after, say, some of those shots missed, and they could have gotten down?

JEFF WALZ: Well, they're all competitors. They felt just as bad after we missed a free throw to have a chance to win a game or send a game to overtime. There's not much I really have to say.

But I was really proud of Imari Berry. I've been doing this for, I think, 32 years now, and I've never seen one player get to the free-throw line as many times as she has basically at crucial times. Like, it goes back to our North Carolina game, we're down one, and she makes one of two. NCAA State game, we're down two, she makes both to send the game to overtime. Duke, she makes one of two, we lose by one. Duke again in the ACC championship game goes 1 of 2 again.

So for her to get another opportunity is pretty remarkable. The kid stepped up and made both.

Then give Alabama a ton of credit because all we needed was one stop and a rebound, and we couldn't get it. They scored and finished, and then there at the end, up one when Reyna missed the first with 2.3, it was like, we're missing the second on purpose because they didn't have a time-out. You make your second, you go up two, then they're going to throw the ball the length of the floor, and it's still going to be a three, but now it's closer. So what's the difference if you lose by one or two.

So that's why I told her to miss on purpose there at the end.

Q. Kind of going off of that knowing the South Carolina, the Virginia, all those games that came down to that one possession, how much of a growth point do you feel like it is when even things didn't go your way

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

you were still able to get this win?

JEFF WALZ: Well, it speaks volumes. The kids kept competing and kept playing hard. That's exactly what we had to do.

But again, we had our chances to put the game away if we could just rebound the ball, and that goes back to our Duke game in the ACC Tournament. So we're going to show this film because you always want to watch the good and the bad, and just try to make sure we understand how everybody has to go and rebound the ball.

We get caught a lot watching. Shot is going up, it's a big shot, it's like, oh, my God, is it going in or not, instead of moving on to the next going, okay, shot's up, now I've got to box out because they've missed and now we're not in position to get the rebound.

At this point in time, you're just trying to figure out a way to keep playing, and we did. We turned the ball over more in the second half than I would have liked. I thought in the first half we did a really nice job with only seven turnovers. Then it was really -- for us, for Imari to have six and go 1 for 7, that's not the norm for her. So it's really encouraging to know we were able to pull out a win, and one of your top players had a sub-par game for her. But she still makes a difference when she's on the floor. She had four assists, three steals.

Then Mac, golly, what can you say about the kid? 13 boards and nine points? It's pretty remarkable just what she gets done. I'm proud of her, as well. All of them.

Q. Coach, it looked like at the end of the game, you embraced Laura, told her how proud you were of her. Can you talk about what place she's made in this program, and when all is said and done, how do you think fans should remember her?

JEFF WALZ: Oh, they're going to remember the kid because she plays hard. It's the one thing I always say. She smiles on the floor. She embraces our fans when she's out in the community. We have good kids. I call them kid because I treat them like my own kids.

But we don't just win basketball games here. They know how to act. They represent not only themselves, their families, our women's basketball team, our university, win or lose, because I've said it all the time, we've lost more here this year at home than we have, I can't remember.

But even after a one-point loss, our kids are signing autographs, and I'm telling you, it might not seem hard, but it's not easy. You know, when a 10 year old, eight year old

comes down asking you for your autograph and tells you you played great and you're 1 for 9 and you missed a free throw to win the game and you want to be like, I'm not sure what game you were watching, but you embrace them and take a picture and thank them for coming, I tell our kids all the time, your true character shows in adversity, in times of toughness.

I think to be honest, I think Taj has made such a huge jump in her growth, from the ACC Finals over the last two weeks, because she'll say, she was humbled, too. We watched the film. She's like, I have no idea why I didn't cross half court.

But those are things as players you look and you're like, that's not going to happen again.

But the effort she's put in practice and her workouts has increased some. That's where you've seen her growth. She had four assists today, a big steal, a huge defensive board, and those are the things that I'm excited for Taj is as soon as you give in and you take the next step just being able to be vulnerable, it's amazing what can happen.

E is the same way. I tell her, it's like her name was "but" because no matter what I said to her, she'd be like but it's not my fault, but it's this, and I'm like, hey, if you'd stop saying "but" it would probably help you a ton.

Her time with the Turkish national team was very valuable. She also had the opportunity to see how pros work and the mindset they have. Man, the change she's made from last year to this year -- and it's not like she became a better athlete or jumps higher. It's mental. It's her approach to the game and the work she puts into it.

So I'm so proud of what she did. She had three assists, zero turnovers, 18 and 11 in 38 minutes of play. It's pretty damn impressive.

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