

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Semifinal - UCLA vs LSU

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Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Charisma Osborne

Lauren Betts

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

Q. You have a very welcoming sunny disposition. In fact we heard you coming down the hallway here. What do you attribute that to? What are the roots of that? Why is that important to you, and do you feel like it rubs off on your team?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I don't know. I think it's more for my protection of my own heart. But I just believe that gratitude is a really big deal. I just think I have -- I think if you want things to be great in your life, be thankful for more.

I just think that I have so much to be thankful for. I think it's rooted in I feel like I've received much more than I deserve, and I'm living something that I love, that I get to compete with purpose and impact people's hearts in the process.

I don't have a lot to complain about.

Q. You see the four teams that are in this region here, and obviously you're only playing one, but you see the bigger picture I'm sure --

CORI CLOSE: I do.

Q. How good it is for women's basketball having this group here? And microcosm-wise, the team you're playing next, LSU, your thoughts on them?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's not even the four teams as much as it has been the entire tournament. This is my 31st year of Division I coaching, and I've never seen a bracket that had more competitive first- and second-round games just across the board.



Obviously being in this one, this particular region, has a star-studded cast, ones that we're very familiar with, that are growing basketball nationally in their towns, even globally.

It's just an honor to be a part of such a group of people that are changing something that will be a legacy long past this tournament.

Obviously with LSU, Kim Mulkey is a proven winner. She's done a great job wherever she's been, from a winning championships perspective. We couldn't be any more opposite in terms of the way we approach the game, but we both are probably the two best rebounding teams in the entire tournament, so I think honestly the game will come in large part down to that.

But I really respect the job that Kim has done. Obviously winning the National Championship last year, much respect.

But we're not playing that team, and we're not playing individual rosters. The best team, I think, the most connected team, the most purposeful team, the most aggressive team, they're going to win. I don't care what the letters are across the front of your chest. It's just going to be a matter of who does it together.

Q. Two if I could on the specifics of the game coming up. The first obviously you talked about different ways of getting there. Pace seems to be a major differentiator. How do you go about emphasizing that to your team? How important is that?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I don't know what their pace of play is. I know they're most effective -- which is different than some other teams that I've seen of past LSU teams or past Baylor teams -- they definitely are their most effective when they're able to attack in transition.

I think the analytics said it was 22 percent of their scoring possessions; it's a high percentage. Obviously a big emphasis for us is transition D, but the best transition D you can have is to be really efficient offensively.



For us to control the offensive glass, to get really high-quality predictable shots, those are going to be important things in terms of controlling the pace.

I think both of us are really comfortable playing fast. I think for us, we use it offensively to be able to get the ball to Lauren Betts before double-teams happen. So from an offensive perspective, I think they use it before we can pack the paint and really control that, and so it's a little bit different. They attack it more off the bounce in versatility that way.

But I think pace of play maybe not as important as being able to play to your team's identity.

Q. Related to that, you talked a little bit about it in your answer, but Lauren being somebody who you try to get transition opportunities, how much is there overlap with the way, say, South Carolina uses Kamilla Cardoso against LSU? Are there things you can learn from that?

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely. I think we really have a lot more similarities between us and South Carolina this year than in previous years. But I think that, yes, I've watched both those games, and seeing how they were able to move Cardoso around, get her touches in certain ways while still being able to create good opportunities for their guard play, for them, Paopao and Fulwiley.

We do have some similarities. I think the biggest thing is how are you going to double-team, or are you going to go with single coverage.

I think those are things that every team all year long has done a little bit differently. I think we're getting pretty good at if they do it this way we're going to go about it this way.

I think the important thing is (indiscernible) shoot it, but we are 13 percentage points better in our shooting percentage when she touches it on the possession.

It's really important that we get her touches and try to play through that, and it really just creates things for other people, as well.

Q. Kind of a big picture question for you. With moving into the Big Ten next year, you guys' national TV schedule is going to look a lot different than it did with the Pac-12 networks and obviously the distribution issues there. How important is it for these teams to be on national platforms not just for the growth of the game but for particular players to sort of grow -- to have many stars within the game, to have those players on those games?

CORI CLOSE: Well, big advantage we have in the women's game, right, is that they stay for four years, and obviously in our current era, sometimes five, sometimes six, depending on what we were dealing with according to the pandemic. So there's a lot of levels to that.

I do think it's really important for the growth of our game, but it's accentuated because people can develop relationships. I think that's why the interest level -- not only do we have some great stars, but they have stayed and developed connections with the fan bases. People not only in their local vicinity, but also nationally have built this -- they're rooting for them, and they're not just rooting for their performance on the court but for their journey and their growth and seeing their maturation.

We're really benefiting that we have some great growth trajectory for our game. We have some great stars, and it's sort of still the purity part. We don't have the one-and-dones. We don't have that.

But the other side of that coin and the level that we're growing is it's also really important for having these young people be able to maximize their opportunities and entrepreneurs with name, image, and likeness.

The more eyeballs on it, the more TV revenue comes from media rights deals, the more that they're able to grow, the more valuable they are in brand ambassadorship kinds of opportunities. That's just a part of our business now.

There's sort of a -- it's a good news -- I wouldn't say it's a good news/bad news. It's a good news/different news, because there are different things pulling on the agendas of the sport now, but I think we can turn that into opportunity, especially for women.

I've had more conversations with our women in the last two years about planning for their futures and investing and taxes and all the different things that I'm not so sure that we've culturally been brought up to think about in the same way, and we're having the opportunity to do so.

But to answer your question, I think it's very important. I think national eyeballs on our sport is incredibly important right now, and it's incredibly important that corporations and media rights deals follow that trajectory.

Q. You've personally have coached in a Sweet 16 game in Albany.

CORI CLOSE: I have.

Q. Just a couple years ago. Is there anything you



learned from that experience going west to east in terms of preparation, time zone adjustment that you can now apply here that you're changing up differently? And for your team in particular, obviously that group has not played in a Sweet 16 group in Albany, but from last year to this year have you noticed any kind of change in approach, mindset, anything like that in the lead-up to this one?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think it's very different because last time we were here we were a 7 seed. We played at Maryland, so we stayed on the East Coast the entire time. It was a very different situation.

We actually played four East Coast swings in a row in December, and so -- end of November and into December. But it was interesting because you have a lot more control of your travel.

We were two and a half hours late last night, so I've got some red eyes and those kinds of things. But I just think the reality is that we're playing in the Sweet 16. We've got a chance to do amazing things. So I'm not going to let two and a half hours get in the way of that.

I just think it's a reality, and if you're focused on things that are out of your control, as Coach Wooden will say, it will adversely affect the things that are under your control.

That's part of sports and life, and the tougher more together team wins, and I'm not going to let something like travel get in the way.

I do think that's a reality, and we really do try to plan strategically for how we travel, how we sleep, how we hydrate, all of those things. We've even been doing studies prior to our joining the Big Ten of what was going to be the right competitive travel schedule as we do take East Coast trips.

We are very strategic, but I also have to acknowledge that not everything is going to go the way you plan, and our job is to make the best of whatever we've got.

Q. As a follow-up to that, I know you'd love to be in Portland in this round and Tara made comments yesterday that maybe it's time to reconsider the two regional format in one location. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on that and felt that that should be reevaluated or if you like the way it's played out?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think this is only our second year, so I think it's too early to make those kinds of decisions. It'll be interesting to ask Tara what she thinks about it after. She didn't play in that piece last year, and obviously Tara is

the best. Definitely her opinion really matters and how she's experienced the growth of this game, so I would definitely listen to her comments.

But I just think in anything, we have to see it play out a little bit and see what happens. So there's definitely difficult pieces. We happen to be in the same hotel as Oregon State, and when you have so many teams going across the country, how it affects fan bases and different things over I think a little bit of time, we'll have to track that and be strategic about it.

But I think it's too early to have a definitive opinion.

Q. Could you give a sense of where you think the conversation is about tournament units for the women's tournament?

CORI CLOSE: It's got to happen. It's got to happen sooner rather than later. If we're going to ride this wave of growth and trajectory, and I know that President Baker has said he's committed I think is the word he used to integrating units into our game, but I think there's no teeth in all this growth if that isn't coming back to the conferences and then to the universities.

You have to -- why would a university president or an athletics director invest back in women to the same equitable amount that you're investing back in men when men get a unit share for this particular tournament and women don't?

It's not that -- I don't think it's intentional. I'm not crying that we're so disadvantaged. But I just think when the trajectory has gone, that if we really care about investing in the trajectory of where the business model is showing we should across all women's sports, not just women's basketball, it needs to happen immediately.

I just think -- we just signed a major deal with ESPN that obviously gives it more teeth, without question. I wonder even now when you look at how well the tournament is doing, how everything, the attendance is going up, that maybe that could be negotiated even quicker.

But I think that corporate sponsorships need to be opened up to allow for even better unit distribution and financial implications for the NCAA.

We don't want to be a drain. We want to be an increased asset for the NCAA. We want to be something that's like, man, you need more alternative income sources. Well, we want to be that. So it's not something we want to take away but add to to expand the pie.

Q. Lauren, obviously you have a different game from Kamilla Cardoso but in both cases you guys are players of size taking on Angel, and I'm wondering what you've seen out of the video potentially of South Carolina, LSU and what you kind of take into your strategy for that game.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, watching that game, obviously it was super physical from the beginning, and I think that's the type of game that I'm going to be walking into.

But I think that's what we've been preparing for all week. I think obviously Angel and I are going to be really aggressive inside. I think just not falling into foul trouble I think is super important in this game obviously because Angel is going to try to obviously go through me this game, and I think just making sure that I stay disciplined in my defense, just making sure I communicate with the guards on the screens. Just being there to rebound, not letting her get O-boards I think is super important.

Q. I don't know if you took a moment during the Pac-12 tournament to think this is the end of this conference, but the teams have had a lot of success, including you guys. Is it neat to see so many friendly faces from the conference still around in the Sweet 16, including you guys, and obviously Colorado is here, as well?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, I think it's really cool to see a lot of Pac-12 teams still in the tournament. I think that just shows how great the Pac-12 was all year-round and how well we've prepared each other for this time of the year.

Q. Charisma, a major differentiator between these two teams all year has been pace of play. I'm wondering how important you think it is to play at the pace you guys are best playing at? And then related to that, how you go about imposing pace early on? What do you do to make sure it works that way even in the early minutes of a game?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, I think a lot of that has to do with how well we play defense and how well we rebound. We're really good in transition, so if we are getting stops and rebounding, we can really push the pace and play our game.

So I think that'll be super important, and I think our team knows that. We're really good at both of those things, so we just need to be ourselves and do that.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the travel to get here?

I understand you had a little bit of an issue last night, got here late, and trying to play an early morning game for you on Saturday?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, we practice in the morning, so it's not that different I would say as far as playing.

But yeah, our plane got delayed a little bit, but that's no excuse for how we'll play tomorrow, and we'll be ready.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, just a little adversity. We'll be fine.

Q. Lauren, everyone speaks about Angel, but Aneesah does a lot of the dirty work down low, as well. Talk about battling two bigs even though Aneesah may be a little undersized.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, Aneesah, another great post player. She is really talented, really physical. I think like I said before pretty much the same game plan. Obviously she steps out on the perimeter a little bit more, so if Angel and I get switched up ever, just making sure I pick her up early and find her and stay disciplined on defense I think is going to be the most important thing for me in this game tomorrow, just making sure I'm not fouling. And, yeah, I think that's going to be the most important thing.

Q. Obviously you guys are playing the defending reigning national champions, and you guys come from a place where there's a lot of famous people around. You live and play there. The fact that they are the reigning champions and there's a lot of notoriety with this team with commercials and magazine covers and things like that, does it add a different edge to it compared to if you were playing somebody else?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: I think there may be a little bit more hype around the game because of that, but we try not to really focus on that. We're just focused on basketball and playing hard and doing what we do.

Q. Do you guys have personal relationships with anybody on LSU's team?

LAUREN BETTS: We both played with Angel this past summer on the AmeriCup Team for USA Basketball, so obviously we know her from that.

But obviously we don't get the time to hang out when we're in season and everything, but we did have a really good time together this summer.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: I played with Hailey for USA Basketball like for U-17s, too.



Q. Does having that familiarity help in any way, having practiced alongside of them and played with them?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I just know what type of player Angel is. Super aggressive, talented inside post player. I think I have an idea of what I'm walking into.

Obviously it's different when she's playing with her teammates at LSU and that chemistry she has with them, it's going to be a little different, but inside I've felt how physical she is before.

Q. How much sleep did you guys get last night? Is there any kind of changes you would like to see for West Coast teams? You guys had to be here at 4:00 a.m. your time. Is there anything you think they should do better for the West Coast teams that have to travel?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: We didn't get that much sleep. Maybe I would say I went to sleep at like 12:45, had to be up for breakfast by 7:45. Not that much sleep. Obviously it helps that we have today to sleep and get used to the time change.

But I think our plane got delayed; that's something that's just uncontrollable, and we just have to adjust to that. Obviously no one purposely made that happen. If that didn't happen we would have maybe gotten a little bit more sleep. I don't know if there's anything different because I think that was just an accident --

LAUREN BETTS: Unfortunate. It was just unfortunate.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Not like someone made it happen on purpose.

Q. From a player standpoint do you feel the growth of women's basketball, fans, the tension? Do you see it maybe from the inside of, hey, when I was younger this wasn't like this?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I would say there is a lot of hype around women's basketball right now, and I'm just really grateful to be a part of it. I think especially right now, with all of the amazing basketball players that we have that are kind of just taking over, it's really amazing to just see that.

Yeah, I think growing up, I don't think I ever saw women's college basketball in this light that it is in right now, and it's really amazing.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, and I think even in Los Angeles, the amount of people that have come out to our

game, and obviously USC was hosting, as well, and there was big crowds for both games.

I think just the growth of the sport and seeing so many people who maybe you would think know nothing about women's basketball like coming out to the games has been really cool to see.

Q. What is it like to play in the tournament and with all of the stars and the feedback that you're getting now from people who maybe didn't watch women's basketball in the past?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: It's super cool. I think it's so much fun playing in the tournament. Seeing people on commercials even like watching other games, I think that's really cool, and it just continues to grow the game for women's basketball.

Q. You each made a specific decision to opt into this UCLA team because you could have played in the WNBA. Lauren, you made the decision to come here. Have each of you thought about what the next couple of days can mean in terms of being able to take this team a place that it hasn't been in a very long time and by some arguments ever?

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, yeah. Obviously I think me and Charisma are just really bought into the goals that this team has. We're going to do anything we can to take this team where it wants to go.

Obviously it's really easy to think about what's ahead, and I think we're just really trying to take this tournament day by day and really focus on what we need to do and stay really present.

I just think it's really easy to think about a future and what could happen with our team, but I just think even today just making sure that we focus in on our practice and what we need to get better at so that tomorrow we play the best game that we can.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, just to add, that's what I came here to do. I came back because I wanted to experience this, especially with this team. Like Lauren said, we're just taking it day by day and we'll go from there.

Q. Watching from afar, it seemed like every time you saw scores from the Pac-12, it's a ranked team playing a ranked team and then you're playing another ranked team. How did your conference prepare you for this in terms of the toughness, the styles that you play? Do you feel like you're prepared for just about anything?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I would say obviously it's the best conference, so every single game that we're walking into, it's got to be like the best scout. We have to be prepared to go into a top 10 matchup every single night.

I think it really has prepared us for this kind of tournament, these type of games, and I feel like specifically as a post, I feel like I'm playing against the best bigs in the country every single game, and so I feel like it's honestly just made me better.

And I've had to grow each single practice. Like I can't really settle with what I've been doing. I have to learn from each game and figure out what I need to do. In a tournament like this, I just bring something different.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Well said.

Q. For both players, just the experience of being in the Sweet 16 last year, what kinds of lessons did you learn going through that that maybe can help or apply it this time around to make things a little bit different?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, I think just sticking to who we are. I think last year when we played, it was like the first time a lot of us had played in the Sweet 16.

I played in it during COVID, so that was even like really different for me, but I think just going into this game like our experience will help us out so much and just remembering who we are and doing the things that we know to do consistently.

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