

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

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Londynn Jones

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

LSU 78, UCLA 69

CORI CLOSE: I want to first thank our three seniors that were here today, including Emily Bessior, who's not with us and was a fourth. Izzy Anstey and Kim Brown and Charisma Osborne. I just want to thank them for their impact on our program, both on and off the court.

Charisma and Cam came back for this year, and I think the thing that stings me as a head coach right now is that this isn't the way they wanted to go out.

Ultimately I take responsibility for that. I'm the head coach. We had 67-64 lead with a minute 46 and we gave up lay-ups and free throws, and we missed lay-ups and free throws down the stretch, and ultimately I'm responsible.

Reality is that I just don't want the last few minutes of the game to define the impact of those three seniors.

Credit to LSU. They got the shots that they wanted down the stretch, and we didn't get the shots that we wanted. We did not execute the way that we needed to, and that's one that's going to sting for a really long time for me. Really thankful for our staff and for our team for what they fought through this year and what they earned, and we'll be back.

Q. Lauren, Angel just said in the first half she was kind of feeling you out, seeing how the officials were going to call the game and then felt like she was able to pick up the intensity guarding you. How did you feel about the overall defensive game plan against you and how that might have affected your ability to be



aggressive tonight?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, they were playing super aggressive from the very beginning. Obviously it was just a -- it was just tough inside. I don't know what else to say.

I think in the first half she did a pretty good job guarding me, but I think at the end of the day it's up to us to create inside touches and everything.

I don't think that it was necessarily what they were doing. I think it was just us, and I thought that we could have done a better job.

Q. Londynn, I know your shots weren't dropping early, but you got those two key threes in the third that really spurred you guys. Can you talk about your perseverance in this game to continue shooting and what the commentary on the team was like to keep you shooting?

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, I think confidence is a big thing, and being a shooter, not only just a shooter but just staying confident in that whether shots are falling or not falling. I have a good support system who encourages me, continues to tell me to take the shots that I practice on consistent basis.

So I just think having that mentality and staying present and focused on that.

Q. What do you guys make of LSU? Obviously you both know Angel from Team USA stuff. What do you make of that program and where it's been the last year, where it's going? What was it like to go up against them?

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, they're -- they're a really talented team. All the best to them. I think we just -- at the end of the day I'm on UCLA and I'm going to say I think we are the better team, and I thought that we just didn't show up today.

But they're a great team.



Q. Can you talk about what the game plan was going in and was just hitting two of your first 20 three-pointers, how did that change what you were able to do, especially when they started collapsing down on Lauren?

LONDYNN JONES: I think we had a very, very prepared game plan. Our coaches do a great job of preparing us before the game. It's just on us to go out and execute, like Lauren has been staying, no excuses. We know what to do moving forward.

But I do think the preparation was there. Of course they're going to double or send whoever they can to Lauren, and we have great guards, so just being prepared on the outside.

Q. Even though Coach Close spoke about Brown and Osborne, being that this is the last year, I always believe that when a player, especially being players, everything that you pour into getting here to this point, nobody sees that, the blood, sweat, and tears that you guys contribute to it. If you two could talk about those players and what they mean to you, especially with them not here to speak for themselves.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah. The seniors mean a lot to me. I think this year has been a struggle for me specifically, and I can't thank the seniors enough for what they've done for me. They've really gotten me through a lot this year, and specifically Izzy.

She's literally like my sister and I'm so thankful for her and her leadership and her guidance. They're all three just amazing people and I know they're going to do really big things and I'm just so proud of them. I really wanted this game for them. They've worked so hard, and they really deserved it today. I'm just disappointed.

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, Lauren really honestly just said everything, but I think their leadership and who they are off the court. As she said, you definitely have a sister in them. As much as it hurts them, it hurts you, and seeing one of us hurt, it hurts us all.

We're really disappointed and we wanted this for them, like she said, but looking forward to amazing things they're going to do because of the people that they are.

Q. The last couple minutes Gabriela gets the bounce on that jumper. What do you think happened from that point forward?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, we just needed to get stops, period. Our defense was just not good enough

today. It really didn't matter what we did on offense. We just needed to get stops.

I think that we just fell asleep at certain times, and the minute you fall asleep they take advantage of that. We just needed to keep playing hard through the entire game.

Q. Did the halftime locker room conversation mirror the one versus Creighton on Monday, and which player took the lead in galvanizing your group?

LONDYNN JONES: We have leadership, so it's not always one, it's multiple people interpreting what they see and what they need to fix.

But I think just coming in, staying present, what we talked about was obviously the things that we needed to work on, and it didn't always go our way, but we tried to find a way, and it didn't turn out as the result that we needed, but...

Q. Coming to the East Coast is always difficult for you, especially in this round. You always lose in a close one. Next year, silver lining, you guys are very young. What do you tell your team going forward?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's really hard because I'm not sure that we can internalize the teachable moments right now.

But there's no excuses. We had this under our control. We could have not been in Albany. We lost some games that we shouldn't have lost.

There's three games specifically that we know let get away that -- not taking anything away from those other teams, but we had opportunities to close them; we didn't. That's why we're on the East Coast.

We have nobody to blame but ourselves from that.

Yes, we have really a great young team, but we talk all the time about in these games that defense and rebounding -- I thought we rebounded pretty well, but we allowed 30 points in the fourth quarter. It's going to be tough.

They weren't like they were just making tough shots. They were getting to exactly their spots and they were getting lay-ups, and especially down the stretch when we made our big run in the third quarter, yes, we had 21 points and we didn't turn it over like we were turning it over in the first half, but we only allowed 14.

When you're in these games you've got to rely on your defense to get those stops.

Then we were trying to play with foul trouble a little bit, too,



and go a little bit of offense/defense and I will play this over and over in my head and try to figure out from my perspective how I could have led them better or different. But you're not going to win games in this level giving up 30 points in the fourth quarter.

Again, I'm the head coach. I'm responsible. They're young. I need to lead them better, and I need to lead them into situations where they have the confidence and that we execute in those scenarios. Youth cannot be our excuse.

Q. There was a moment between you and Angel at the end of the game and she said that you had told her, good game, and one of your coaches was talking crazy. I'm not sure what she was referring to because she wouldn't go into detail. I don't know if you could share any light on what that's about?

CORI CLOSE: That's not who we are. I don't want to say anything about Angel. I will only speak to what the Bruins are, and the Bruins are classy, speaking life into each other, and we are not going to give that any -- we would never do that, and especially it would never come from one of my coaches.

Maybe she heard something mistakenly, but I can tell you -- and I'm not saying anything about Angel, I'm just saying from what comes from my camp, absolutely not.

Q. How did you feel the game was officiated, especially inside? Both teams' post players really piled up a lot of fouls. Two, did Flau'jae Johnson exceed what y'all expected she might do? It was her best game ever in the NCAA Tournament.

CORI CLOSE: She's a great player. I watched her when she tried out for USA Basketball this summer. I've seen her -- I obviously saw her journey last year. She made some really big plays in some big moments.

I thought a really critical one was the out of bounds play. She got on the second cutter there and she made some big plays in transition. She's a really good player off the bounce especially. I thought one of the keys was she hit those two threes early behind the screen and we really wanted to go under things and keep her in front of us, and it forced us to make adjustment and go over the top of those screens.

So then down the stretch it allows her to get a step downhill, and it makes you choose between getting her downhill, and then they went to a pick-and-roll on the open side and we didn't rotate all the way across.

I think really what allowed her to get going is her hitting

those big threes early, so it forced us to make a change on that.

What was your first question again? Oh, the officiating. I have no comment.

Q. Obviously this is the last game that you guys will play in the Pac-12 or representing that league. Could you reflect on what that means to you? I know the game might not have gone the way you guys wanted, but what the league has meant to you over the years and moving forward?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it's been a really special group of people to be a part of, growing this. When I first came back to the Pac-12 we were really like the fifth of the Power Five conferences from a women's basketball perspective, and we got together one May before the May meetings and all the coaches and said hey, what do we need to do together to go from last to first.

We've done it, and we made a strategic plan about how we're going to be a part of it, and we executed it selflessly. We took off our institutional hats and said, we're going to grow our game and we're going to grow Pac-12 basketball, and we accomplished it.

I will be forever grateful to those other institutions, those other coaches, the other players who were a part of building that up, and I will be also forever grateful to the Pac-12 people behind the scenes that really worked very, very hard to build that up.

It's a mixed bag. We're really excited about joining the Big Ten and what's next for UCLA, and we're also humbled and grateful for the journey that we've been able to have in the Pac-12.

Q. You've gotten to this weekend a lot and not gotten past it. How hard is that for you, and talk about the narrative of not being able to get the break you want, and what's it going to take?

CORI CLOSE: It's hard in the moment right now to be honest with you about what's it going to take. We've obviously been to a lot of Sweet 16s and one Elite 8, and we want more.

That's my job is this off-season to figure out how we can earn more, and what does that look like from my leadership, what does it look like from the growth within the players, what does it look like in our player development and team development for these high-pressured moments.

I think that has to be our next step, and we have to be able



to -- no excuses. We've got to find ways to adjust, to pivot, to overcome, to conquer, and relentless pursuit of the excellence that we're going for.

Q. I wanted to ask real quick, do you feel like -- because yesterday Oregon State, another Pac-12 team, to be honest with you, I think when they came in, everybody that's come into this bracket thinks it's just going to be automatically LSU and Iowa and South Carolina and Notre Dame. I think clearly Oregon State had something to say about that, and you almost put the fear in it by changing what you guys did today. Do you guys feel like you get the respect -- I know you talked about the Pac-12 and how you moved the conference, but coming into this bracket, I know you can only speak for your team, but do you feel like you got the respect that you deserved coming into this bracket?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's hard a little bit because on the one hand I always say, look, we take care of the things under our control. We are in a different position. That's the tough part. We have to take responsibility for that. There's just nobody else other than ourselves.

At the same time, we were in the toughest conference in the country. We were tied for second in that conference. We had more top-25 wins than anybody else, and we got sent to the toughest bracket. I think everybody would say this is the toughest bracket.

That being said, bottom line, down the stretch, Oregon State executed in the half court and got stops, period. Bottom line, today, we didn't execute in the half court down the stretch, and we didn't get stops.

You can go back and forth, but that was under our control. So yes, there's always going to be arguments and different things and it's very hard with some of the principles when you have that many good teams from one conference. The principles and the S curve require some different things, which are difficult.

I will always want us to try to focus on the things that are under our control. I will always ask that the NCAA and the committee try to reward the whole body of work, and I will always hope that the officiating grows at the same trajectory as our game.

That is what I will always come back to is that we are all growing together.

Q. I know you talked a little bit about the seniors and what they meant to this program, but specifically Charisma Osborne, we all know her decision to pass

on the draft last year and come back, and I know she felt like this team could achieve big things. If you could reflect on kind of what her overall impact meant to this program and the fact that unfortunately it fell short today?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah. It's really difficult because we're not a sorority, right? We are a basketball program that has very high aspirations and very high goals. So there's this -- in this moment it's really difficult because honestly, I just feel like I let those three down because -- and not just Charisma. It's all three of them, because I wanted it for them so badly.

But we always talk about the two things that stay with you for the rest of your life from these four years is who you become and who you impact.

Who Charisma Osborne and Cam Brown and Izzy Anstey have become and how they have impacted not only our program but the community and represented UCLA with such class and dignity, it is remarkable.

Right now the outcome just really, really stings, but long-term, I'm so proud of who they've become, who they've impacted and the kind of players -- Charisma is just starting her basketball career. She's going to have a long career in the WNBA and overseas, and she's going to do great things.

But I always want that to pale in comparison to the young woman she's become and the leader she's become, as well as those other seniors.

Q. You talked about sort of growing and how the fans have come and embraced your team this past year especially and how the game is growing. How do you take all that into account and then personally for you, what's the next few weeks look like for you?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I do think I really am appreciative of the way that Southern California basketball has embraced both us and USC. The future is really, really bright for our programs and the battles we're going to have, the attendance records we've set, the eyeballs on our sport, the TV ratings, everything.

Thank you to the people like yourself and others that are covering our sport. It means a lot.

We want to be a part of this incredible momentum that women's basketball has garnered. We want to make Southern California really proud, and we want to get more eyeballs from the East Coast even on our sport there in Southern California.



So really grateful for the way people are showing up for women's basketball. I think it's a really big deal. I hope this is just the beginning.

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