

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

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Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

**UCLA Bruins**

**Coach Cori Close**

**Gabriela Jaquez**

**Angela Dugalic**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UCLA's head coach Cori Close.

Coach, before we start off with questions, perhaps you can talk a little bit about the journey through the season and postseason that's gotten you here today.

CORI CLOSE: Thank you. And thank you all for being here. I've been doing this 33 years. To see the growth of the game -- and I see some new faces and some more older, mature faces, but everybody that is a part of growing our game together and telling the stories are just really, really important. So thank you all for what you have done and what you continue to do.

I think for us, it's been just trying to focus on the present day over and over and over again. And that may sound like boring coach-speak, but I think that is how we have avoided trying to internalize too much pressure, how we have tried to enjoy the journey more. And so really we're just trying to stack those days over and over again.

I showed them the video about that we're not trying to build a wall. We're trying to just place this one brick as perfectly as we can. And we're just going to try to continue that.

This is a 1-0 season right now. We're just going to try to place this brick and prepare the best we can to put ourselves in the best position to fight another day.

**Q. Familiar opponent. How are they playing, how is Minnesota playing different? Are they playing their**



**best basketball of the season? And what are the challenges you expect them to present tomorrow?**

CORI CLOSE: They are playing the best basketball of the season. They're disciplined. They know who they are. They know how each role of their team fits best for the collective whole.

I think Dawn's done an excellent job. I've been watching her coach for a long time. And she just does a great job of, I think, playing to her team's strengths. And I think that's great coaching, right, when you see what you have on your team and you put them in the best positions to be successful.

And I think Minnesota does a great job of that, for how they use their post players, to how they create isolations for their downhill drivers, how they have different actions off of screening and off-ball screening for their shooters.

They present a lot of problems. They force you to be really fundamentally sound defensively, and in large part that's because of their discipline.

**Q. Since the 51-point win against Iowa, there's been a couple of different bumps in different quarters with the Cal Baptist and Oklahoma State. Is there another level that you think that you can get to to get back to the kind of performance you guys had in that game? Or do you see just a different process entirely?**

CORI CLOSE: I think each game, you see it throughout March Madness on the women's side and the men's side, each game is going to present different adversity points. And I think that we don't look at it as getting back to something. We look at it as everything is a learning opportunity: What does that teach us; how does that make us better; what kinds of things do we need to tighten up?

When you can have certain things in the heat of battle get exposed and still find ways to win and get another opportunity, you can just allow it to make you stronger. And that's the choice you have from each experience.

So I don't really look at it that way from those two games. I



just think everything is measuring ourselves against the championship standards that we've set, and those are process standards. And so if we fell short in an area, it's how do we get back to what we know how to do and what's under our control.

**Q. You've talked this season about the freshmen and their growth and how sometimes it feels like they can't do anything right. But when you look at Sienna, how have you seen her progression from the beginning of the season to now? And when you go up against a team like Minnesota that can play in the post, how key is she going to be for that match-up?**

CORI CLOSE: It's huge because when we were at Minnesota earlier in the year, Lauren got in foul trouble. So we needed, and they play four guards, so we needed another strong post defender to step up.

It actually probably wasn't Sienna's best day, but now looking back on it, I'm able to see how far she's come. When I'm studying that film in preparation for this game, I'm like, wow, Sienna's just had -- she was just coming back at that point in the year, in the Big Ten, and she lost, I think, ten weeks. And so I think it's just a matter of, maybe even 12 weeks, that she needed more reps.

When I watch back that film, I really do celebrate Sienna's growth. I think she's in a much better position to be a contributing factor against a really strong post offensive team like Minnesota because her post defense has improved so much.

**Q. Just to go back on the familiarity piece, when you're looking and getting ready for the game this weekend, do you look back at the tape when you played them before, do you update it? Like how do you actually approach that? I mean LSU's playing Duke whom they also played in December, so there's familiarity there. So how do you approach that, knowing you've played this team, they played you?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think it's both/and, right? You're looking at how might they guarded some of your specific actions, or how did certain match-ups work against their personnel? And you're going, what are they doing differently?

And then you also have such a larger database of, okay, in close games, what did they go to, and which are the players that they're really leaning on in pressurized moments? You just have a lot more data points that way.

But I think you see how their philosophy, how they're viewed in terms of going against yours. So I think it's a

little bit of both. We want to definitely -- there's a sense of how did they attack us in that last match-up, and then what have the tendencies they've shown since then? I'm sure they're doing the same thing.

I think it's an interesting thing. You've got a couple match-ups that way. But I think if you're really good at scouting, which I'm very thankful that I have a staff that is, I think we're doing a deep dive and trying to leave no stone unturned.

**Q. So you guys have an international recruiting coordinator and a couple of international players. How has the growth of the game abroad impacted both your team and women's college basketball?**

CORI CLOSE: I think you can say basketball in general, right? I think that it's just a completely different system internationally. So being able to combine that system -- how they are grown in the game, how they are taught the game from a grassroots level all the way up, bringing them to the U.S. -- you're sort of taking advantage of a completely different growth sequencing that those players experience.

I think their IQ is really high. I think their sort of sequencing of movements -- they're more used to playing the game and not running a bunch of plays. I think we really want to trend that way.

When you look at the WNBA and the NBA, they're all trending that way. And so to have that equipping in our program is really important to us.

But I'll tell you one of the things that I appreciate most about our international student-athletes is that they appreciate this experience so much. That's contagious. Gratitude is contagious.

They've not been given all the attention, all the tools, all the experiences that our American kids have been given growing up. And I know it's good for me, in my heart, to be around them because they have a sense of gratitude that is really good to remind my heart too.

**Q. Angela's obviously a mismatch just because she's a bigger guard, but I've noticed her playing a lot more in the post this year, being a lot more willing to post up. How has that kind of changed your offense and impacted it?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think it really is a compliment to her. She's always had the skills, but she has sort of wanted to be on the perimeter and be that stretch 4. I think she's established that she's a really good stretch 4, but her

willingness to use all the skills in her bag are at a different level this year.

That's why I said at the beginning of the tournament, she's our X factor. She's usually a major mismatch for whoever we face. So to the extent that we can really get consistency out of that mismatch, I think that's an incredible advantage for us in this tournament.

Specifically against a team like Minnesota, you know, that plays four guards 90% of the time, for her to be able to -- she can guard on the perimeter so that it's not a mismatch defensively.

And when people talk about mismatches, usually they're talking about offense. But really to the extent that you use someone's versatility is to the extent that they can be versatile defensively. And Angela has proven that.

But if she can really assert herself in the post and react going to the perimeter second, that puts us in a really good position because most people are not wanting to rotate off of Lauren. So for us to be able to take advantage of Angela in that spot is going to be a really important piece.

**Q. With all the changes that have been happening in college basketball over the last few years --**

CORI CLOSE: Just a few.

**Q. -- how much do you think about your role as a coach and the voice that you can have to advocate for your players and also just, like, the future of the sport?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I hope I can be a voice. I hope I can be an advocate. I think that I've been given the great opportunity to coach some great players and to be a part of some of the transitions in the game.

I had the privilege of being on the Kaplan Report that really changed, that we're using March Madness right now, right? And I think I want to be a part of the global changes in the game.

How do we now figure out this transfer portal? Let's not complain about it. Let's have solutions about what's right and what are adjustments that need to be made. Should everybody be able to transfer one time? Yeah, I do. But after that, what adjustments can be made?

I'm a huge advocate for NIL. It should have happened 20 years ago. And -- not but, but and -- we need boundaries. We need infrastructure. We need competitive equity. We need transparency.

So what is my role in helping that? I don't know yet. But I want to be a part of solutions.

If I can be just a little small part of trying to leave it better than we found it from a global standpoint, from a really growing-the-game standpoint, I would really be proud to be a part of that.

**Q. I'm going to follow that question from the big picture standpoint. We had a coach leave a Power Four for a so-called mid-major -- I know a lot of people don't like that term -- with Kristy Curry. And I asked Dawn about -- because the last time she was at the Sweet 16 she was at a mid-major -- and she said she thinks it's harder than ever now from the mid-major perspective. But she also thinks it's harder than ever from a Power Four perspective. I wondered if you could even compare the run you guys had, I believe, from 2016 to 2019, when you made four in a row to now, ways that it's harder and maybe that you couldn't have even imagined back when you're making that run?**

CORI CLOSE: There's so many. When I was at UC Santa Barbara, I was in the mid-major side. We went to a couple straight -- to the Sweet 16. So to see it from -- there's just so many more things you have to do.

You've got to raise enough money to have the NIL budget to attract the best players. You have to manage the outside distractions. I just think the role of social media is an incredible strength, and an overused strength can become a distraction and a weakness. So we have to manage how that pulls on the tension of our players.

To get everybody pulling in the same direction, to have the resources that I really feel -- I was actually having dinner with my athletic director last night, and it's harder than ever to be an administrator and to support your teams to excellence. There are so many things that are pulling on the resources at this time.

So I do, I think it's harder for coaches. I've never been as tired as I have been in the last two years, and it has made me think how much longer I can do this. I'm just being transparent with you about that.

I think there's so many things that are harder, and we keep losing incredible people, on the men's and the women's side, that I think we've got to really -- if there's one thing I would ask of our governing bodies and the NCAA and our administrations is please develop infrastructure and boundaries that create an opportunity to have sustained excellence and sustainable pace. Otherwise, we are going to continue to lose some of our best coaches, and I do not

think our game can afford to do that.

**Q. Minnesota won the WBIT last year, and now they're in the Sweet 16. You guys were in the WNIT in '21 --**

CORI CLOSE: Yep.

**Q. So how do you think these tournaments are propelling long-term success?**

CORI CLOSE: I think they're really important. I remember going into the WNIT that year, some of our players didn't even want to play. We were devastated that we hadn't played better down the stretch and there were all these expectations, and I had a number one recruiting class that were freshmen that year.

And I think about what would have happened if we hadn't have played that. We learned how to win there, we learned what does it mean to win six games, what does it mean to go into hostile uncomfortable environments and have to win.

I remember our semifinal game was at Michigan, and we had to get on a bus and we drove nine hours and we played at West Virginia. Sold out crowd in both places. And I just think that was huge in our development.

I think there's these wins and losses and disappointments and triumphs, they create different opportunities of learning. And I can't imagine if our path without that run in the WNIT -- and I would bet that Minnesota would say similar things.

**Q. Charlis Leger-Walker, arguably the best Kiwi player that ever came out of play in college basketball. What will be one piece of your favorite memory of hers because since this is going to be her last year?**

CORI CLOSE: You don't have enough time for me to say all the memories I have of Charlis Leger-Walker. She has been absolutely spectacular for us on the court, as a leader, in her work ethic, in her fun spirit, her joy.

I was sitting there on the plane last night -- she had another one of her YouTube videos come out where they had choreography trying to teach Gianna Kneepkens how to dance, that she could earn her way into the pregame dance circle.

And I'm sitting next to my mom on the plane and I'm just laughing out loud. And I think several people on our team just laugh more and smile more because Charlis Leger-Walker is in our life.

She's a heck of a basketball player. I remember when I was recruiting her, her mom said there's going to be times where you're just going to hand over the clipboard.

And Kiki Rice and Charlis Leger-Walker came to me last spring and said, "Hey, Coach, would you be open to maybe making some changes in our secondary fast break?" And I'm the co-offensive coordinator along with Tony Newnan. And we did this deep dive in our transition break. And it was led by Charlis.

She brought me film that she had edited. She had this whole system -- and we have pretty much implemented what they brought to me.

I think it says something about the trust I have for her. But I also think that both her and Kiki lead us both in their physical play but also their intellectual commitment to the game. And Charlis has been just a joy to coach.

**Q. Way back in November, you and Oklahoma played in this building. I want to know, was the reasoning behind this idea that you would be here at this point? And how did that game come to be, and how do you think that helped you going into this?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, we actually were supposed to play in a different match-up that sort of dissolved. And we thought, hey, we need to keep this match-up. And then we thought given the fact that we have a change, how can we make this happen?

And really give credit, Champion of Westwood, our organization, got on the phone with people and different promoters, different organizers, which NBA venues had availability. And we figured out they had availability the same day we were going to play. We talked to TV, and we were like, what a great opportunity.

We're just really excited that now we're here and that UCLA's having a chance. We're walking through the hallways, and we're like, this feels familiar. There's something about that, right?

When we came here in November, to play Oklahoma, we talked about it. We expect to be back here. And our job from this point forward is to earn that. And to have that now come to fruition, I just think there's sort of a peace about us that, this is what we earned, this is what we intended. And the job's not done, but we're in a good spot.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Gabriela Jaquez and Angela Dugalic. Angela, perhaps you can talk a little bit about the fact that the Golden 1 isn't necessarily new and unfamiliar to you. Do you want to talk

a little bit about that experience that brought you here the first time and now has you here today?

ANGELA DUGALIC: We played one of our first games versus Oklahoma here at the beginning of the season. And I think it's not really a home-court advantage for us, but we do have some sense of familiarity with the court. So that's definitely a plus.

THE MODERATOR: Gabriela, talking about that home-court advantage, again, not necessarily your home court, but close in terms of geographically. Any sense of family, friends and the like making the trip up to Sacramento this year?

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, I'm super excited that we're playing in California, Norcal. My family is going to come out, drive up. I'm going to have a lot of family and friends here. I'm just super excited, and it's really nice that we just had a quick, short flight.

**Q. Angela, I know you were part of the NIT run back in '21-'22. What has propelled your long-term success with UCLA making the tournament every year since?**

ANGELA DUGALIC: A few things. One is just trusting the process. That was sort of like a rebuild year for us. Then the next year I went through injury and I came back. But I also think that next year, when I was out for injury, Gab's class came in, which obviously tremendously helped us and just them being people who pursue excellence coming in day in and day out to work out early in the morning, staying after practice.

And that just led the rest of us to go and follow them because we didn't want to hold them back and we didn't want to be left behind as well. So I just credit a lot of our success because of them and their tenacity.

**Q. Cori was talking about how it's really important to just stay in the moment, not look ahead, lay a brick instead of trying to build the whole house all at once. I'm sure that that's a mindset that you probably have had not just this year, but in past tournaments as well. But it also kind of sounds easier said than done. How do you not look too far ahead and not even just look past an opponent, but look to the next round or the next thing? What does that look like for you guys?**

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: Yeah, we just keep reminding ourselves how important it is to go 1-0 every day and to stay present. I mean, especially this being a group with a lot of seniors, these are our last couple weeks with each other and so we don't want to rush. We want to enjoy every moment we have with each other.

And also I've been saying you can't get to the future without being in the present first. And we're always going to stay present and just continuing to go remind ourselves to stay present because, like you said, it can be hard. But we have a great group around us that will help us out.

**Q. Gabriela, Coach has talked a lot this season about how when you came into UCLA you were kind of like an undersized post player. This year, being able to kind of play point guard, working on your 3-point shot. How much do you feel like your game's kind of grown over these past few years? And how much more, I guess, do you kind of feel prepared as you go further in the tournament?**

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I think coming in freshman year, I personally knew I had a lot to improve on. And that made me excited because I knew I had a lot to get better at. And just my coaches continuing to push me every year, especially in the offseason, I think that's where most of my growth came from.

And just focusing on what do I need to improve on. And that really started on bettering my 3-point shot.

So, yeah, just appreciate my coaches for believing in me and working with me every day to get better and just have more confidence.

**Q. Coach talked a lot about having international players on this team. What does that mean for you guys?**

ANGELA DUGALIC: I think it just allows us to play a different type of basketball. Obviously there is more of a European play, more American play in all the other continents.

But I think it just allows us to be more diverse. For example, for me, like I've played overseas. I've played here as well, so I can mesh well with any system. And it will help me as well in the pros one day when I go there.

But I just think here it allows me to help the team in any way I can, because if you want you can stretch me out, I can cut, I can post up, whatever.

That doesn't just go for me. Gabs also played for Team Mexico, and they have a different style of play. Lena plays for Croatia. I can go off -- basically everybody plays for some national team. But it just allows us to be more versatile.

GABRIELA JAQUEZ: I think also Ang has played in the

Olympics. So she's been in pressurized moments before at the top of the top and competed at the highest level possible at a really young age.

So I think also just getting more experience. I think all of us when we play for a international team, we play a different role as well. So getting a chance to work on different things that you don't necessarily maybe do on UCLA is really helpful and really important.

**Q. The familiarity of playing a team you played in the Big Ten that you played before, how much does that help you prepare? Coach said that you watch some film, but also do a deep dive into things they've done since then, and potentially you could see Duke who you also played before, and how much does that help, the short turnaround to be playing teams that you've already faced?**

ANGELA DUGALIC: I think there's a good balance and a bad balance in the sense of, yes, we have played them before and there's some sense of familiarity. But also at the same time, the Duke team that we played at the beginning of the year, that's a different team than now. The Minnesota team that we played earlier this year, it's a different team than now.

And the same goes for us as well. We've also expanded in some areas as well. So it's just obviously you want to go still win and dominate how we did last time, but at the same time acknowledging that they have improved and we have to do certain things that maybe we have to change in our scouting report because they've obviously adjusted after playing us as well.

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