

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

Friday, March 27, 2026  
Sacramento, California, USA  
Golden 1 Center

**UCLA Bruins**  
**Coach Cori Close**  
**Lauren Betts**  
**Kiki Rice**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

UCLA - 80, Minnesota - 56

**THE MODERATOR:** We're joined by UCLA head coach Cori Close and student-athletes Lauren Betts and Kiki Rice.

**CORI CLOSE:** I think playing part of the Big Ten has been such an honor, and they have gotten us ready for these moments. It's sort of a bummer you had to go against a Big Ten foe, but Minnesota has done such a great job all year. Just really respected how they played, the discipline, the identity they play with.

They forced us to make some real adjustments in how we were going to guard them based on how we played them last time and how well they were playing down the stretch. I just really want to give them credit, but also the entire Big Ten.

There's been some talk about who the Big Ten is, and the math just doesn't math. The bottom line is our net wins in the non-conference, second in the country, only right below the SEC, how many teams have done such a great job all year long.

I just really want to say thank you to the Big Ten, because I think part of the way we were able to play today is because of the way they got us ready.

Our team, just proud of their energy, proud of their focus, proud of their next-play speed. They didn't let missed shots affect our commitment to the defensive end of the



floor.

Bottom line is we found another way to be 1-0, so we get chance to go 1-0.

**Q. Kiki, you had 25 points, tied your career high, against Minnesota in January. Today you dropped 21. What about this match-up brings out your best?**

**KIKI RICE:** I think both games we had a really good collective team effort. And I felt like I got some good match-ups, good looks at the basket. And I think when teams commit so much to my teammates, whether it's shooters or our posts inside, it opens up driving lanes.

So teams are going to have to choose how they defend us. And I think this game we did a good job of just sharing the ball, and people got good looks. And I felt like I got a good amount of good looks.

**Q. You guys made a big adjustment in the second half, not allowing them to have dribble penetrations, what changed?**

**LAUREN BETTS:** It's just coming out with a mentality that you're just going to take away what they want to do. You can talk about little details that we made. But I think it all starts with just that aggressive mentality that we were just going to come out and make things really hard for them.

And I thought we did that and it just creates like opportunities for us to play in transition. So I feel like that motivates us a little bit -- if we want to play how we want to play on offense, we've gotta take away what they want on defense. Proud of our guards.

**Q. You guys absolutely dominated the paint through these first three games, have scored over 50 points in the paint in all three rounds so far. Obviously, you have very talented bigs. But besides just your bigs, what makes you guys so good at scoring in the paint?**

**KIKI RICE:** I think our versatility. I mean, we have a lot of different people who can score in a lot of different ways. From a post standpoint, obviously our forwards, they draw



a lot of attention, Lauren draws a lot of attention down there. And that opens up driving lanes for us guards.

You have a ton of shooters, so that spreads the floor out and that allows me and Charlissee to get downhill. And then you have Ang and Gabs who come in there and both, like, Ang, she'll dominate in the paint. And at the 4 she's really a mismatch for a lot of teams. And then Gabs just slashes really well.

So I think we have a lot of versatility that allows us to spread the floor and score in different ways. And teams, it's going to be tough to take away everything. Yeah, I think attacking the paint is definitely one of our strengths.

**Q. As a follow-up about the paint, you and Angela Dugalic combined for 20 points on 5-for-13 shooting from the field. What is it like playing with her down low and probably making that paint presence?**

LAUREN BETTS: I feel like Ang is one of those players where she just makes such a big difference off the bench. It's really hard to guard her because she can play everywhere on the floor. And she's really dominated inside this year. And I'm just really proud of her and how hard she's worked.

But, yeah, I mean if they're going to focus on me and try to take me away, Ang usually has a mismatch there. So we're just going to make sure to try to get her touches moving forward. And I mean she's just really dominant and really skilled, and I'm just really happy with her.

**Q. To have a player off the bench double-double, when rotations tighten up in the NCAA Tournament, and 13 points, 10 rebounds, what does she bring to this team and added dimension to elevate you?**

KIKI RICE: I mean, Ang is a fantastic player. She has been for many years. I think her ability this year to step into whatever role is asked of her and her ability to do that consistently and at a high level, we just trust her so much out there.

So we know whenever she comes in the game, she's going to make an impact. Whether that's scoring, knocking down 3s, scoring the paint, getting rebounds. I thought she did a fantastic job of crashing the boards for us today.

But she truly is one of our X factors. And she changes the game and (indiscernible). We know we can count on her every single time and she's going to make smart decisions, she's going to really help us out. We appreciate just the way that she shows up for us and is really selfless in her role.

**Q. You guys, postgame you went to the huddle at center court. You put your hands up and you moved on. It feels very all business right now. Like, this is not the time yet to sort of let loose and celebrate. Did I read that right?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it's March, and this is a lot of our last years. So we're just trying to focus on what's next. And we are approaching it very business like.

I think we learned a lot last year of just not being happy with how far we get. We want to win the whole thing. That's ideal. That's what we want this year.

So I think just celebrating how hard we played this year, or this game, and then we've got to focus on next one.

KIKI RICE: Job's not finished.

LAUREN BETTS: We had a bet with my team that I was forced to say that (laughter).

**Q. Lauren, as the defensive anchor in the paint there, when you have teammates like Gabriela and Gianna that are cutting off those drives, cutting off the dribble penetration, what does that do for the team, and how much easier does that kind of make your job?**

LAUREN BETTS: I think in the back of their head they know that I'm going to be there to help them. But I'm just so proud of the way that the guards have stepped up in just taking away drives. And, I mean, that's something that we really wanted to improve from the beginning of the season.

And the way they move their feet and how aggressive they've been lately has just been so amazing for me. And I can just focus on my job of taking away their posts. Yeah, just super proud of our guards and their physicality. They've been working really hard.

**Q. Lauren and Kiki, last weekend at home, you guys kind of struggled in the first half against Cal Baptist and then struggled a little bit in the second half against Oklahoma State. Do you feel that today you guys played a full 40-minute game, or is that something you still need to work on?**

KIKI RICE: I think all season our goal is to get better, to put four quarters together, to put 40 minutes together. I think we're still continuing to get better in that.

I do think today we really focus on coming out. We weren't worried about whether shots go in or not. We were just

focused on dictating defensively and being aggressive. And I think that's the mentality that we'll need to have over these next few games in order to play our best basketball.

It's not about whether shots go in. It's about how we're consistently playing and on the defensive end. And we'll play off that. But I do think we did a better job of putting four quarters together today. And we'll continue to get better in that each game.

**Q. Lauren, can you tell us a little bit more about that bet, what the stakes were? And was there anything else that you guys are doing right now to create a little bit of levity?**

LAUREN BETTS: I think our team is just very unserious, and they like to be in positions to make myself look stupid all the time. So this is just another opportunity for them. And it worked.

CORI CLOSE: It's different every day.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah.

**Q. Lauren, it seemed like just the way that you were attacking the paint today and just some of the celebrations you had, that there was an extra level of sort of energy and edge in a way. Is that just kind of a symptom of -- not a symptom but an effect of March? What kind of energy does that do for you and for the team?**

LAUREN BETTS: I think for me, it's just my competitiveness. I feel like that's just something I always do. I like to celebrate and get my team hyped. But I think March does bring a different level of excitement out of me. This is my last go at this.

I just really want it for my team, and I'm going to bring whatever aggressive mentality I can. And I hope that it spreads to my teammates.

But yeah, I mean, this is my last March. So I'm going to just work really hard and bring in whatever excitement I can.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Coach, can you elaborate a little bit on the defensive adjustments and guarding them that you mentioned? And it seemed to me one key turning point was early third quarter, Charlisse threw back-to-back outlet passes that led to layups, and that really seemed to get you going at a time when the offense needed some buckets?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think that when it really all came down, most of the time it was guard rebounding, but it was rebounding. They're one of the top teams in the country at when they get an offensive rebound or kick-out 3s or production off of their offensive rebounds. I think they're either one or two in the country off of that.

And when we were able to control rebounds and then get it into our guards' hands quickly, that's when you saw those great kick-aheads and decisions by Charlisse. I mean, I think she had eight assists and one turnover. It's just great facilitation.

I thought a lot of people made plays that weren't points that were winning plays for us. I thought Sienna Betts had eight rebounds in eight and a half minutes or nine minutes. I thought Lena Bilic came in and gave us some really good minutes.

And so I think Charlisse's play and I think it was some of her defensive plays and help in rotations were just excellent.

I thought this might have been one of Gianna's best defensive games. So I'm looking at all those little things.

But I do think that when we're able to get defensive rebounders and get it into our great playmakers' hands on the perimeter, we're either able to get to downhill drives or we're able to get it to a rim post. And it all starts with defense and rebounding.

**Q. In the third quarter, you kind of created separation with your defense. You held Minnesota to three points with about three and a half minutes left in the third quarter. What was the conversation on defense going into the second half? And did you feel like you tightened up more defensively, or did you create an offensive rhythm to get that separation?**

CORI CLOSE: We tightened up defensively. That's what we talked about is to continue -- one of the things I was most proud of today is we really did not shoot it well, and we didn't let missed shots -- where we had nine missed layups in the first half, and then we didn't make many 3s; we shot 25 percent from the 3-point line -- we didn't let that dictate our defensive intensity.

The motions of being frustrated on offense. That's something we've been challenging them on. That was a huge growth area.

But we said, hey, no matter what, when we leave this locker room, we've got to start with a kill, which is three

stops in a row, which we did. And just really making them play deep into the shot clock. I think those momentum changes of shot-clock violations when you play all the way through, I think those are momentum-getters.

It's almost like when you take a charge, I think those are a really big deal for us.

But I think we started to feed off of us getting stops. Then when we got rewarded in transition a little bit more, that helped us as well.

But I'm way more pleased how we adjusted defensively. I did not think it was one of our best offensive games. Or maybe I should say we had 11 turnovers but five of them were in that late third quarter where I thought we just got a little sloppy, left our feet.

But overall, I thought we just took care of the things that were under our control. I think we can play better.

**Q. Denise Curry was here, a great from yesteryear. Have you run into her? Have you talked to her? I asked her what she thought of the product, and she said she's just so tickled to see how great your team is, how far the game has come. She's a local product from just across the road here?**

CORI CLOSE: But she's a season ticket holder with us, and so we get to see her all the time. You know when you have your two people that have had their jerseys retired in Ann Meyers Drysdale and Denise Curry, that are season ticket holders and that are at every single game they can -- I get text messages from them all the time -- that just means the world to us.

And I would even extend to all of our great alums have been so -- there was a ton of them here today. And we really do play for them. And we know that we stand on their shoulders and the trails that they blazed.

And so I'm just really humbled and grateful to have our alumni support. And Denise Curry is one of the ones leading the way.

**Q. Back to the 11 turnovers, Charlisse Leger-Walker, she had eight assists and only one turnover.**

CORI CLOSE: Right.

**Q. Could you talk about her ball-handling skills in this game tonight?**

CORI CLOSE: I have confidence in all of our guards' ball-handling skills. But I think Charlisse, specifically, is

one of the best processing point guards I've ever been around. Her ability to understand how rotations are happening in the second line, what's the next play, and if she makes one mistake, boy, she's not making it a second time.

She just really processes the game intellectually at a really high level.

And her and Kiki play so well together. And they complement each other. Having Charlisse on our team has freed Kiki up in some ways and vice versa. So that's been really fun to see.

But when we get in trouble is when we start to do too much off the bounce, before we've had great passing and ball movement. And that's what happened. We started to attack off the bounce too quickly, left our feet, and that got us in trouble.

But I think for the most part, as a whole, our team was pretty good. I think we had 20 assists and 11 turnovers. I think day in and day out, it's pretty good. Outside of that little two-minute period, I think that's a strength of our team.

**Q. What did it mean to have Lena Bilic be the one that broke that 3-point drought? And at the end of the game to have that kind of what the future is?**

CORI CLOSE: I thought Chrissy, I thought Sienna, I thought they all came in and made great contributions you can tell that her teammates, Lena's teammates are really excited about her and for her. Just watch how they react.

Same thing in the Oklahoma State game she came in and had some really important plays, hit some big shots, had a great defensive play. That's what I like the most is her aggression on defense has really grown.

I've said from the beginning of the year, those three freshmen have a really hard job because they've got such incredible people ahead of them. But along with Timea and Amanda Muse, we're really excited about what we have coming back and what we'll add through the portal.

And I just really compliment those freshmen for their work ethic, for staying the course and for being ready when their number is called.

**Q. Your points in the paint, I mean 50 points in the paint three times in a row doesn't happen by accident. And it doesn't happen just by one very dominant post player. How much of an emphasis has this been for you guys in this tournament?**

CORI CLOSE: All year long.

**Q. And your identity, why is that so important to you guys?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's such high-percentage shots. It gets us to the free-throw line more. If we're dominant there, people start to dig in and then we can get inside/out 3s. And even though we didn't shoot them well today, over the course of the season we've been able to capitalize people with people that are bringing double teams, triple teams.

I think it's just an emphasis for us because we're really good at it. We're one of the tallest teams in the country. We wanted to play from the inside/out all year long. And that includes posting our guards. That includes dominating the offensive glass. That includes obviously playing through Lauren.

But today was a big emphasis to get our 4s touches because they were going to play a four-guard lineup. And when we brought Ang, especially, we wanted to take advantage of that mismatch and at least get her touches and force rotations. I thought we did a good job of that.

But that's really been our emphasis all year long. The better we do that, the more open 3s we get as well. This is an uncharacteristic game in how we shot the 3.

But I was telling them actually after the Iowa game, in the championship of the Big Ten, I just said, you guys, we have to be built for the days in which those 3s don't fall.

And today they didn't fall. But when you are built through the paint and built with a confidence of how to get that, you weather those storms. And I think that's the reason we've been built that way.

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