

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Final - Duke vs UCLA

Sunday, March 29, 2026

Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Angela Dugalic

Lauren Betts

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UCLA - 70, Duke - 58

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by coach Cori Close and student-athletes Angela Dugalic and Lauren Betts.

CORI CLOSE: First of all, just a compliment to Duke. They really came out, were the aggressors in the first half. I thought they played to their identity really well and forced us into some tough decisions.

And what they did from the beginning of the year to what they became at the end of the year needs to be commended. Their staff did an excellent job and their players did an excellent job throughout the year.

Secondly, I just am -- people are always talking to me, several people out on the court were talking to me about our team culture. And team culture is not this nebulous thing or phrases on a wall; it's a group of people that are willing to be committed to the hard, right behaviors over and over again. And that's everybody from the staff, to the managers, to everybody in between, and most importantly, every single person in the program.

I cannot tell you how many times throughout that game we referred to our values, who we are, what our identity was, what we had to get back to.

Coach Tasha Brown deserves so much credit to, I thought, our mental toughness to respond in the second half.

They have the tools. And we talk about next-play speed, getting back to neutral, focusing on our response. I thought we needed all of it. And they had the confidence



and they drew on those tools on a consistent basis.

But I'm just really humbled and thankful to be a part of a team and staff that cares about things from the inside/out.

What you saw on the court is a reflection and a byproduct of what's happened on the inside. And I'm just thankful to be a part.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

Q. Angela, what was the message from Cori at halftime? What from that halftime meeting allowed the offensive to spark to start and sustain through the second half?

ANGELA DUGALIC: Before Cori came in, I think we were just we were able to call each other up and out on like what we have to fix. And I think that's a great quality of our team. Is no one takes it personally.

If I need Lauren to do something better, she's willing to take accountability for that and vice versa. That goes for everyone on my team.

When Cori came in, she was super steady, and I think that gave us a sense of calm. We still were pretty neutral. We understood that the first half wasn't a good representation of how we want to play basketball. But Cori came in and what she said right now is, like, how do we stick back to our values and stay neutral, focus on next-play speed.

Q. Lauren, you all are wearing shirts after this game that says, "We're Not Done." Like you expected -- like, in your mind, you were supposed to win this game, you're supposed to go back to the Final Four. Can you talk about how much pressure there is in "supposed to"?

LAUREN BETTS: I don't think there's any pressure. I think that's something we talk about a lot in this program is keeping our circle small. We're not worried about what the media has to say about us, what other people have to say about us, fans. We're so focused on our progression throughout the season and just trying to get better every



single day and every single game.

So we came into this game, like, all right, we're going to compete to the highest level we can and win this game. We're really thankful to be in this position.

And I'm just so grateful for these girls. But we're just going to keep moving forward. And all that matters is the people in this circle.

Q. Angela, you said in the halftime, players were calling each other up and out on what you need to do better. Can you give us some examples of some of the things that were said that needed to be addressed in the second half?

ANGELA DUGALIC: I think for starters, we try to anchor ourselves on defense, and we knew that wasn't a great depiction of how we want to play on defense. I think we just needed to adjust.

I even told the guards, I need to you get through the screen, so we can properly help you guys and get back to our player. And then they had some things to say to us as well.

Q. Angela, Coach Close used the word "commitment." What type of commitment does it take to have the acceptance, execution and buy-in of being a key contributor off the bench for this entire season for this team?

ANGELA DUGALIC: We all have the same end goal at the end of the day. What I did, to take a step back, to be a sixth player, that, to me, doesn't -- I think I know in other people's eyes that's a great thing and a great quality, which I take full ownership for that. I am proud that I did that.

But at the same time it just seemed like the obvious answer. I just wanted consistency for this team and something that we just didn't have to worry about was like starting lineups and all this anxiousness around it.

That was just an easy answer for me. And I just wanted to have a -- if we can just take that out and make the team, you know, smooth sailing, I'll do it again, any day of the week.

Q. Angela, to follow up on that previous question, you stayed an extra year here at UCLA. Throughout this season you've -- but just to do that and then come here and follow through on this mission that the team has, and then to come through tonight and really, in a lot of ways, be the backbone of this win, what does that mean for you?

ANGELA DUGALIC: I knew that going into my fifth and sixth year that this team is so capable of winning a national championship. And obviously, we went to that level, I would say to the Final Four, last year.

I think that was just a new scene for us, you know, flashing lights -- I keep saying that -- but it truly was just a new scene for us.

I think this year we have the approach of, this is a job. This is a business trip, at the end of the day. And we have a job to do. And that's to win a national championship.

I'm super excited and happy, and I'm going to take it all in, what we did tonight. Tomorrow, it's a new day. We have a new opponent, and I'm going to focus on that.

Q. Lauren, you guys didn't come out playing up to the standard today. But after halftime, obviously you guys pretty much took over the course of the game. How much does that say about the character of this team as far as being able to come back? The only other time you guys went into halftime down all season was the loss to Texas. How much does that mean to have that adversity going into the Final Four?

LAUREN BETTS: We've grown so much since then. So, I mean, I think the maturity of this team is what gets us to this point. I mean, we could have gone into that locker room and just kept our head down and gotten mad at each other and been pissed off.

But we want to win this game, at the end of the day. So I think the ability to get on each other and still show up and play for each other and come out with that aggressive mentality, we were going to take this game and we weren't just going to let things happen anymore. We wanted to just take over.

I think that's the mentality that we have to continue to start with moving forward.

But, yeah, I agree, we can't have those slow starts. But, again, we're going to learn from this game. And I'm just very thankful that we won. I'm just very grateful that we won.

Q. Lauren, can you talk about your pride in how well you played and you're such a load inside, and as excited as you are for your team, were you guys also happy for your coach who poured herself into this? Maybe talk about that too.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, this means so much to



everybody. And I'm just so proud of this program, the amount of people that pour into getting us to this place every single day -- like, coaches, players, support staff, practice guys, assistants, managers -- there's just so many people that help us. Yeah, this program means everything to me.

And Coach Cori -- Coach Cori, I don't want to get emotional, but she means a lot to me. She's helped all of us so much. I'm just very grateful for her. And she does so much off the court that you guys don't really see. And she's hard on me every single day and annoys me at times, but I know it's because she loves me.

And this is just another step in our journey together. So I'm just really thankful.

Q. Lauren, before the game started, what were your emotions? And how did those shift come the second half? Because you looked like a totally different person.

LAUREN BETTS: Thank you. I mean, I don't know, I think I was pretty mad. I just didn't like how that first half happened. And I know that I could have been a lot more aggressive. I think going into a game like this, sometimes you just take yourself out of your head and you realize, oh, this is the Elite Eight and my season is on the line. So I've got to wake up a little bit.

I don't know, I think going into the locker room, I was just pretty certain that I wanted to win this game. I spoke to all the girls and held people accountable. I think I just came out with the mentality, I'm just not going to lose. So whether that's me scoring or blocking shots or just getting extra rebounds, I was willing to do whatever the team needed.

Q. Lauren, you start off games as the lone big surrounded by four guards. When Coach brings in Angela, how does it feel to have another big on the court? And does it change how you operate in the paint?

LAUREN BETTS: It does. And honestly I don't even call Ang a big because she can do everything on the court. She's just so skilled and she spreads the floor so well.

And I think tonight I'm just so proud of, like, the confidence and her poise going in the game. You could get in your head in moments when we're down and trying to get back up. But she just did all the right things and what we needed at the time.

For her to have that selflessness and just come in the

game off the bench and just fight for what the team needed, I'm just so proud of you. So, yeah, you did so well.

Q. Lauren, in the documentary that came out earlier this month, you said that you watched last year's Final Four, like, 10 times. So why do you do that? How have you used that motivation to kind of like help you get here? When is the last time you watched it?

LAUREN BETTS: Why did I do that? Because I was mad. And I just didn't understand how that could happen.

But, I mean, I think for me it just riles me up. It's nothing, like, not getting mad at any individual. It was a team loss. I think, for me, it was just, how can I be better going into next year, and how can I push this team so we can get there again and have that opportunity.

But yeah, I don't remember the last time I watched it. I think I just tried to let that go finally. But, yeah, it's all about what can we do to be better and just use it as an extra motivation.

Q. Lauren, after the game, you and Coach Close brought, I think, two gentlemen from the stands down to come celebrate with y'all. I think one was named Dennis. Who are those guys and why was it important that they be with you?

LAUREN BETTS: So both of those guys are, that's my head coach from high school, Coach Josh. And then Coach Dennis is my assistant coach. And, yeah, I won a state championship, Sienna and I both did, with both of them.

They're my family so I wanted to make sure that they were on the court and got to celebrate with us. They coached Michaela as well. So, I mean, it's like the Grandview connection, and I thought it was just really special to have them with me.

Q. Lauren, you have five seniors in the starting lineup, a lot of experience on the squad. How are you able to lean on that experience to stay composed after the first half and come out with that big second half?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I feel like that's the standard that we've had all season. I don't think we ever get too high or too low. We just remain steady throughout the entire game.

And we've had moments where we've had close games. I'm just so proud of the way that we're able to just stay calm and still hold each other accountable while also just

competing at the highest level.

I think that's just what makes this team so special. It's definitely a group thing. It's not just one person. I think every person in our leadership group has just done a really good job of just remaining that steadiness.

Q. Angela, you played national ball with Serbia. And, of course, there's about to be a gang of them in the Final Four on the men's side with the (indiscernible) brothers and David, I forgot what his name is -- Mirkovic. But what's going on in the peninsula in the that southeast part of Europe where these players have grasped on to playing basketball internationally? And you're one of them. You're part of it. What's going on here? You're part of a big program right here with UCLA. Could you explain the concept of that?

ANGELA DUGALIC: I don't know what they put in our food, but it's a Balkan connection, I guess. You've got from their team, obviously, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Croatia -- they have more internationals on there. And here on this team we have -- obviously I'm Serbian and Lena is Croatian.

But I don't know, I'm really happy for them, the fact that they're going to the Final Four. I think that's great. Not only for Illinois, just being a fellow Illinoisan -- I'm from Chicago. But also just a fellow Balkan, I think that's a great thing for them, and just a great representation of our countries.

Q. You had to take notice of the crowd, just hearing all those sound pops. Did it sound like Pauley in there? And how was significant was the fanfare in their supporting y'all and helping you come back and things like that?

ANGELA DUGALIC: Just tremendous. I'm so happy that we got an opportunity to play. It just felt like a home court advantage, honestly. In fact, we were able to play in California. I know it's a little bit away from LA but it just still felt like a home court advantage.

And thank you for everyone who came in and showed up and showed out for us. And I know some people obviously couldn't make it. It's a long flight for some people. But just like the support. I've gotten so many text messages from my brother's right now playing in Bristol. And him and his team are watching on the bus and they were rooting for us. And then people back in Chicago, Serbia.

I can proudly say that we're international, or worldwide about that. But just a blessing, the fact that we were able to play in front of our fans and our crowd.

Q. I think Kiki had eight boards, Gabs five, Charlisse three -- even the ones they didn't get. Just their activity back there getting their hands on the balls. And how important is that what does it do for your team when your guards are able to rebound like that?

LAUREN BETTS: It's huge. It's the biggest difference maker in the game, to be honest. Duke is a really athletic team and they're really scrappy. And that was the biggest thing on the scouting report was to rebound.

When they're working super hard to take the posts out and boxing out, I think it's huge when the guards can go in there and get some boards.

I think that's a mentality. It's not a skill. They just really wanted it more. So for Kiki and Gabs to do that, that's a really big deal for our team.

Q. Lauren, I had the pleasure of covering you during your days on the Farm, at Stanford. The shocking news was that you were leaving. Without getting into all the details, what was the reasoning for you to make that move? And why go down south to UCLA?

LAUREN BETTS: I think that, first off, very grateful for my time there. I think that I knew that I wanted to -- that I was going to be happier somewhere else. That's not to point blame at anybody or anything, but I think it was the best decision for me.

That's really all that matters at the end of the day. I wanted to be happy. And I had a great relationship with Coach Cori and the girls. I played with lots of them, got coached by Coach Cori at U-19s USA. So it was a no brainer for me. But I think coming to UCLA has been the greatest decision I've ever made. And I would do it a thousand times. I'm just very grateful for this program and everything that they've done for me.

Q. When the final seconds were ticking off, the five of you were on the court, came together in a little huddle, put your arms around each other, looked like maybe something was said. Was there anything said there that was significant or meaningful?

LAUREN BETTS: I just said I love you guys. That was it. I said I love you guys.

Q. Angela, with how physical Duke was being with you guys and whether or not there were whistles or not, did you feel like you needed to set the tone in that way of just being able to fight through that physicality? How do you feel like that was happening and affecting

the game?

ANGELA DUGALIC: Like they both said, Duke is just a tremendous team. The team that we played at the beginning of the year and the team we played right now -- two different teams. And just a really big shout-out to them, just putting in the work and obviously having a great coaching staff.

I even told the girls during timeouts and halftimes, but we have to be the ones who are more aggressive. I think that was just my mentality of, like, they're being really aggressive with us, denying the ball. And whether there were calls or not, we can't control those, honestly.

So I just had the mentality of, if they can be that aggressive, then why not us be that aggressive with them? And that's really it.

Q. Lauren, you brought back out and performed an encore performance of your guys' choreography. Whose idea was that? And what was it like celebrating with your friends and family?

LAUREN BETTS: I forget her name but the head of our dance team and cheer squad -- she did. I guess she -- she has some control over the music. I don't know how she does it. But apparently she did it for Big Ten. I had no clue, but she's the one that keeps doing it.

They just play it and Gabs comes running over and we -- honestly, we did it in the locker room today too. I didn't realize they were going to play it on the court in front of everybody. But it's always fun.

Q. Heading back to the Final Four now with a trip under your belt already, how does that adjust, change, calm whatever the word is, your mindset heading into this next stage of the tournament?

ANGELA DUGALIC: I keep saying this, but we just have the mentality of this being a business trip. And I honestly can't emphasize that enough. It's just, like, we're staying neutral, the small circle that we constantly talk about. Really the most important thing to us is our team and our staff and whoever is in that inner circle. Everything else outside of that doesn't really matter in this case.

What we've done in the past, even today, this is all great, and again I cannot emphasize how happy and elated I am.

Tomorrow is going to be a new day and we're going to have a new opponent and that's going to be our next focus. Not the next game after that or the final -- the next game is who we're going to be most focused on.

LAUREN BETTS: Just trying to go 1-0, 1-0. That's it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Angela was saying how she made the decision to come off the bench this year and be a sixth player. I'm wondering, how did that conversation go at the start of the season knowing you had Gianna and Charlisse coming in and what that was going to look like?

CORI CLOSE: What she said was so right on. She said, I could sense that who is going to start every week could become a distraction.

For her maturity to say -- she had film with -- every player has a coach that they watch film with every week. She was watching film with Soh on our staff. And she said it to him first and said, you know, I don't really care if we start. And I just think this has the danger of keeping us from being our best. So I'd like to tell Coach Cori that I want to come off the bench. And I just want her to trust me in big moments and to trust that I'm going to do what needs to be done for the team.

He said go tell her right now. She came down the hall and asked to talk to me. I just -- I think it set the tone for the selflessness that was the expectation for the rest of the year. If anyone was tempted to think about themselves, you could point to the choice that Angela made.

It's so fun that she's been rewarded for that. But I think, more importantly, our team was rewarded for that because it's been one of the two biggest character traits that's carried us to this point, which is selflessness. And it started with that decision.

Q. Coach, two years after the exodus of the defunct Pac-12 and you guys going to the Big Ten and going to back-to-back Final Fours. So is it as easy as it looks? And how much has the Big Ten embraced you guys?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, no, the Big Ten has been spectacular for us. Obviously I felt like I was grieving and celebrating all at the same time -- grieving that the Pac-12 was no longer because it was such a huge part of our history and West Coast basketball, and the people I got to share it with were spectacular, some in this room. But at the same time I was really thankful, with conference realignment being what it was, that if you wanted to compete for national championships, you needed to be in the Big Ten.

I felt like the resources, the vision for women in sport, specifically for women's basketball, there was great vision.

There was strategy. There was infrastructure. And I thought we had a path forward to pursue the level of excellence that we wanted to pursue.

So it's one of those things where I want to honor what got us here and the past and the people I got to share it with and be really grateful for the present situation that we're in and that we get to be a part of the Big Ten.

Q. Can you reflect on this journey back to the Final Four, when you have such a big goal to finish a job, but you've got this months-long increments to get there?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think the key factor is once you determine what your outcome, what you desire and your outcome, the factor, what carries you through is to not think about it again.

In the summer, we spend time, okay, everybody knows we want to learn from what happened and have a chance to compete for a national championship and to go back to the Final Four.

In order to make that happen, what are the standards? How do you reverse engineer the habits, the standards, the commitments that you're willing to make? And we literally never talk about it again. We don't. It's really inconsequential.

If you are really present-focused and process-oriented and you stay committed to those values, outcomes will find you. If you focus on the outcomes, usually you'll skip steps in your process. So we literally, after July, never spoke about it again.

Q. In today's game plan, today's scout, where did you have Ashlon Jackson ranked? Because your team held her scoreless today, 0-of-8, 0-for-5 from 3, especially with the flare for the dramatic that she had on Friday night?

CORI CLOSE: I got a chance to -- I've been on the committee with USA Basketball the last two years -- and I just think she's a great player on both sides of the ball. I thought she showed great maturity the other night. But I've been watching her her entire career. And so just kudos to her.

I think team defense is everything for us. We wanted them to -- we thought if we could chase them off the 3-point line and forced them into hard 2s, then the challenge was really just coming up with the defensive boards.

So we just didn't want her -- she has deep-range 3 -- we

just didn't want her to have any daylight. I thought we rotated a lot of different people on her. Charlisse Leger-Walker was predominantly on her. But I thought she did an excellent job. But she's not an easy guard. And she's had a spectacular career.

Q. Twice in this game you guys challenged calls, and both of them went your way. How big were each of those two calls for you guys?

CORI CLOSE: Well, as usual, when good things like that happen it's because I have people on my staff that are a lot better than me and a lot smarter. But we have a system in play that we try to have certain people that are responsible to look at it right away.

And also, you know, I can tell by our players' reaction what they are very confident of. And, honestly, it's not the same for every player. There are certain players that I just know they're going to get that right.

So I think the combination of how emphatic they were about the call and having the quick reaction of our video team that was able to give me that information allowed us to do that.

Q. You were up, I think -- sorry, you were down 46-41. I think you held them without a basket for the next, like, eight minutes or so. So what was, defensively any change or just good defense? The second part, Angela said when you guys went to the locker room, they already sort of had taken care of things and you can walk in. How much of a comfort is it that you have so much senior leadership that can actually do that and you don't have to go in there screaming and yelling, so to speak?

CORI CLOSE: It's truly what I've leaned on all year long. One of our phrases in our mental conditioning is you have to talk learn to talk to yourself rather than listen to yourself, because stuff comes in, doubts come in, all these things.

And literally I was going into the locker room talking to myself going, they've got this, be solid, stay really steady for them. I was literally just talking to myself, like, hey, we just gotta regroup here.

And it's true what Angela said, they had really taken care of things. We made a couple of adjustments in the second half. To just really everything that they were doing was attacking down the tunnel the middle of the key. And we wanted to bring our ball-screen defense a little bit higher. Mair was just spectacular on her mid-range game coming off that, especially to her left.

And we really wanted to make some of those we needed to force some back cuts and force them to make shots towards the baseline and an attack that way, which I didn't think they would have as a good rhythm. And then we would have better box-out angles. So I think we did a much better job of that the second half.

But it really offensively I mean I think we had 12 turnovers at the half. We wanted for the game to be 10 or less. And I challenged them to have five or less the second half. We ended up with six.

You know just holding them to eight points in the third and 11 points in the fourth that fueled us being able to attack in transition. And we were able to find Lauren so much eels yes, sir because they weren't able to set their defense and control the rotations.

Q. Wanted to get your perspective on the halftime locker room scene. What was the vibe when you got in there and what did you say to them? Did they share with you what they've already said to each other or the gist of it?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I usually come in because I don't want to repeat everything. I'd be like okay, what have you guys talked about, what have we covered here? And then you know I had like two or three things that I thought were important but I first listened. I think when you have a mature group and when your culture is pretty intact in terms of the values, it's better for me to be quick to listen and slow to speak. Usually when I speak, I will have better things to say.

Q. I know we don't want to really dwell on that first half. But that was only the second time this season that you've trailed after the half. Kind of a foreign concept for this team. What were you seeing from that first half? 12 turnovers, those things. Will you break that down for me a little bit?

CORI CLOSE: What I said to the team in the locker room after that was just like, hey, even now, even this time, we can't change. What does this teach us? What do we learn from it? How do we take the experience of that first half and help us be better prepared going into the Final Four and to our next opportunity at 1-0.

I just think that we really didn't execute our game plan very well. I always joke around with my mom sitting here, when people ask me, what did you say at halftime? It was such a great turnaround in the second half. I was like, how about, what could I have done to have them listen to me before we went out and follow the game plan from the beginning?

We didn't control rebounds. We weren't the aggressors in creating catches. We didn't go strong to the rim and execute our stuff. Lots of things come into play.

That's why we focus on the response. We have event plus response -- E plus R equals O, equals outcomes. Instead of focusing on the events, which are usually out of your control. It could be a bad shot. It could be a lack of rhythm. It could be your nerves. Instead of focusing on the events, focus on the response. We want to strengthen our R to be stronger than any E we're going to have to face. And I actually think the first half is going to be really valuable to us in having us strengthen our R.

Q. This program has taken a significant step every season. Sweet 16 blowout, Sweet 16, almost knock out for LSU, Final Four last year. Where are you going this year? Does that give you guys confidence? What does that feel like to sort of take the next step?

CORI CLOSE: I think one of our three core values is having a growth mindset. And I think we actually have them write it in their journals before they leave a lot of the time. And the definition of that is to everything that happens to me today is an opportunity to learn and grow.

I think just stacking those days, like, what did that experience teach us? What got exposed there? How do we adjust, whether it's roster construction, whether it's skill development, whether it's mentality, what point does every single thing teach us?

I think it's staying the course on what you believe to be the values of what leads to winning. And I really emphasize what leads to it. I actually have more joy and more -- it's more rewarding to watch the steps of growth that lead to that.

Winning is a byproduct. So we've just tried to keep a growth mindset of it all and try to let every situation teach us.

Q. Lauren has talked a lot about how much work she's done in terms of confidence and self-belief. I'm curious how you see that manifesting in a performance like today where she trusted herself to change the second half?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that we do a lot of work on you can't outperform your self-image. So it doesn't matter what anyone on the outside knows to be true. If you haven't done the inner work on the inside, it's going to be shallow. And it's probably going to be overtaken by adversity.

And I think when you see what Lauren has done in the inner work and the behind the scenes, in the what do I want to be? What do I believe to be true about me? What has the work I've put in earned me in terms of confidence?

I think she's able to build a foundation that is solid. So adversity comes and hard things come and doubt comes and pressure comes. But I think because of her committed work from the inside/out, she was able to regroup mentally and get to neutral and focus on her next right stop.

Q. Kind of following up what I asked Angela, how needed was the physicality that she brought on, the toughest that she brought to set the tone?

CORI CLOSE: It was palpable wasn't it? Like she just had an aggression about her from a rebounding standpoint, from how she was posting up with the contact. Her poise on the catch, the way she was switching out on the guards. I mean, you could just tell. There was an aggression about her that was just special.

It was just really huge. I just could not be any happier that she brought that. It was difficult.

I thought Sienna Betts did a great job giving us a lift and a quick sub for Lauren in the first half. And I was sort of trying to find different ways to get rest for people and the physicality of that.

But I just thought that Angela was in a zone. I needed to use my timeouts to rest her and shorten the subbing rotation, because I could just see it in her eyes. She just had a presence about her and a confidence that our team was really feeding off of. I thought it was just important to ride that home.

Q. I feel like the stat sheet doesn't tell the whole story for Gianna in terms of the second half?

CORI CLOSE: I agree.

Q. Defensively especially whether it was cutting off drives or even her ball denial and not allowing who she was guarding to even catch a pass. Just how key was that and how important has she been defensively for you all season?

CORI CLOSE: It really goes back to growth mindset. I remember being on the phone with her when she went into the portal and asking her, what do you need from us and how do you need to grow?

She talked about how much she wanted to grow in her defense and how she wanted that to be her anchor. She is

undeniably a phenomenal offensive player.

Today, I thought how cool? We would not be in this position without Gianna Kneepkens. And she did it with the area that she turned from a weakness to a strength. That's something she should be really proud of.

Q. As you touched on a little bit in your opening statement, I mean that game in Vegas against Duke, you were up 30, you never looked back. You didn't really get to do much. What are a couple of the biggest things you've seen improvement from the Blue Devils?

CORI CLOSE: Well I just think their purpose offensively I tell you Delaney Thomas just what she's done, she's been so different averaging five offensive rebounds a game for them. There's just so many people. When you start naming names, I just thought she went from someone we played off of in that game to talking about her constantly in the scouting report this game. So she does it in so many quiet ways.

But there's several people on there. But I think their confidence, I think they have the same players. I think they have the same great coach.

I think the reality was that they weren't believing it at the time and now they believe. I think that they have earned that. That was not easy. Lots of teams would have thrown in the towel. Lots of teams would have sort of imploded internally.

I think that's probably one of the most brilliant jobs I've seen from a group of coaches in building them from what they were experiencing then to how they look now.

Q. Coach Wooden never defined success by winning games and losing games. Does this team need to go 1-0 twice next week to achieve competitive greatness?

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely not. Of course, that's what we want to do and that's our focus in terms of how we want to master our craft and how we want to compete to the level of excellence. But I will never let a 40-minute game define the growth, experience and who they have become and who they have impacted.

I also think that it creates a pressure that doesn't allow them to play their best. I think they have accomplished everything they need to. This is about making that next step. This is about trying to master their craft, trying to be an elite teammate.

If they can look themselves in the mirror and go, I have

done everything under my control to master my craft and I have chosen to be an elite teammate, I want them to go compete with freedom and joy and know that they have done the most important things already.

Q. You've coached this group more multiple years over. It's a lot of continuity, especially in the current transfer portal era. How important is that and how important is going on this run and last year's run for building the next group of UCLA?

CORI CLOSE: We had been talking about this, whether or not we were going to cult down nets today. There was like no water and celebration in our locker room because this really was, like, a 1-0 season for us, and we did expect to be here.

It's a very business-like approach, but I decided -- I literally was praying about it this morning, I was like, you know what, in terms of building a program, we're relatively new on the scene that way. And here we are in California -- this was about sharing the experience with the village that helped us get here.

I thought it was important that we got to say thank you to the fans that came, that we got to experience the joy together on the court, and that we got to have a reference point even with our young ones that are coming back that, okay, this is what this feels like. This is how we get here. This is what this process is like.

I really have no interest in going back. We have been very intentional about preparing for the portal, who we have coming in in our roster construction, and our NIL planning. All of those things to reload and not rebuild.

I thought that really sharing this experience with our village and understanding what the feeling was like was really important to continue that growth process for our program at large.

Q. You just got done talking about the village and addressing the fans after the game. Obviously they felt it. Could you feel it, just the support of all the fans behind you?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah.

Q. And how much are you looking forward to taking that with you in the Final Four in Phoenix?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think it was palpable, right, when we walked out, the energy in the building -- and I'm really thankful to Sacramento for being great hosts but also what they did with us, we had a game fall through with

Oklahoma and that was supposed to be played in New York. And we decided that we were going to bring it here and they got behind that game in November.

I just think there was a familiarity. We stayed at the same hotel, we had the same rhythms. And I just think that we were really planning intentionally for what it was going to be like here. But it was really fun to just have the energy and the people behind us.

And I got to share a moment with Denise Curry and Debbie Haliday who are part of the '78-79 teams that also went to back-to-back Final Fours when it was AIAW and want to give them their flowers.

To have those moments, when you go through really highs in life and really neat things it's really only meaningful if you get to share it with genuine people. I thought that having it here in Sacramento brought a different meaning because we were able to share it with people that we really care about and we know the people that helped us get here.

Q. My follow-up question was, obviously Lauren was named most outstanding player, Angela on the all-regional team. Can you speak to just their skills, their talents and all the hard work that they put in for this?

CORI CLOSE: I was talking to Jordin Canada, who was obviously a starting guard in the WNBA. She was back in town and worked out with us a little bit. It was before practice, and she said, you know, we were trying to build this kind of work ethic. But we thought we made really big strides.

But this is every single player, every single day putting in this extra work, before and after practice. It's not sometimes. It's not a few people. It is every single player. And I just think there's a culture of work that we value.

So I'm not surprised. It becomes your destiny when your commitments, not your feelings, lead to your destiny. And their commitments have led them to this place. No shortcuts. Nothing else. Committed work.

Q. I watched your team get introduced on the floor and it was senior, senior, graduate student, graduate student, senior, Angela coming off the bench. These are all players, the reality is this is all their last shot at the thing that you all are trying to accomplish together.

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely.

Q. How much pressure do you feel?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's mostly I just don't want to let them down. You know, I want to be there for them at whatever turn they need from me. This is not about me. This is about serving them, and I definitely -- I actually texted my pastor this morning and just said pray for me that I would have just peace and discernment and I want to serve them well.

I want them to, if whatever they need from me, I want to be able to provide it, and this is a calling, not a job. This is about trying to teach, mentor and equip young women for life beyond UCLA, and I just want to be the right leader for them for this next step.

Q. How important is it for your team, your program, your fans, to not have to change time zones for the entire tournament, meaning starting in LA, here in Sacramento, go to Phoenix, and Phoenix is now on the same time zone? How important is that for you for routine, for your training and for anything and everything that your team does?

CORI CLOSE: I barely know what to do, because literally in 33 years of coaching, I have never had this, ever. And I've been to a lot of NCAA Tournaments, and I've never been able to stay in the same time zone.

It's obviously a luxury. I don't think in the end, I think you have to go and you've got to battle with what's under your control and you've got to go do the work. But it's really nice when you're also trying to build a fan base and to have these experiences where they can share in the journey.

It's not only important for our team and performance, short term, but I think it's also important for building long term.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports