

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Baylor vs USC

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

McKenzie Forbes

Rayah Marshall

JuJu Watkins

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now for USC is head coach Lindsay Gottlieb. We'll begin with your opening statement.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Sure, thank you.

Incredible to be here. Appreciate you guys coming out. I know it's early in the morning. I think it's been well said that women's basketball is in such a great, exciting spot. I would like to say I do think the journalism around that has a lot to do with it. So I appreciate you guys.

I think some of the writing and stories that are being told are really high level. We appreciate that. Journalism is important, particularly in women's basketball. A lot of you guys have been here long before this inflection point.

As far as our team, we are excited to be in Portland. We're excited to be in the Sweet 16. Locked in and focused on a great game in front of us and a really competitive game in front of us. Just a joy to be with this team, and very grateful to be here in Portland.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Thanks for all those nice things you just said, but I want the transcript to reflect I'm upset Rice is not here this morning. You talked in Vegas about how it feels like you're ahead of things, right? You didn't expect necessarily that you'd be able to be this good this quickly. JuJu has played a role in that. Your kids seem to play with a lot of joy and freedom. How much



do you think that is helping?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, this team was newly constructed this year. As we've earned sort of an identity, grown into who we are, one thing we've talked a lot about down this stretch run is continue to reflect what I think has made us good. That's this ability to sort of juxtapose joy and a looseness and a bit of a freedom with an urgency, right? Winning is really hard, especially at this point of the year. I think it takes those two things.

I don't think the fact that we are a little bit like loose and joyous, I wouldn't mistake that for not being super urgent. I think it's allowed us to play without the weight of the world on our shoulders, allowed underdogs to focus on what it takes to get a game won. That's a lot of grit and toughness, but at the same time if you're playing stressed, that doesn't work either.

I do think that's been some of our secret sauce, so to speak, is we're able to do both things at once. I think it's just because they're focusing on the game in front of us and happy to still be playing together and not feeling a ton of pressure.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about the growth you've seen defensively with this group, especially in the post-season, how JuJu has helped?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Did you say defensively?

Q. Yes.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, many of you guys know our associate head coach is Beth Burns. She's a defensive mind. She's always thinking that side of the ball. It's always been a priority of ours. As you feed into your identity, you learn what really works for you.

I think our players understand when we lock in on the game plan and do it really well, our kind of word for that is 'juicy'. No matter what the game plan is, if you're not juicy, it doesn't work.

I think the length helps us. JuJu has a ton of length, and



she's a terrific shot-blocker. Rayah Marshall was All-Defensive everything last year, and she's a better defender this year than she's ever been because she still has the shot blocking and the instincts, but now she anchors us, understands the coverages, calls them out. She's a weapon on the defensive end.

We have other lengthy people, Forbes, and KD is a really good defender. It allows us to understand our game plans better, play more connected than we were two months ago.

We know shot-making is important, but we start our offense when we get stops. We need to get stops to be as good as we can be.

Q. JuJu obviously has been an L.A. star for a long time. When did you realize she was starting to explode nationally? How has she handled that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, there have been a lot of -- nothing really completely surprises me anymore with JuJu. We're all on this ride that everything is new.

I was sitting at home at the beginning of March Madness and see Joel Embiid in a commercial, and all of sudden there is JuJu, and I'm like when have you seen the reigning MVP in a commercial with a kid that our teammates just made sit in the back of the car because she drew the short straw on the way over here.

Her impact and reach I think is only going to grow, partly because of her game and how you see her, you get excited and you want to come back, but also because of the way she handles the attention, how much she understands her place in this. If there's an opportunity to smile at a kid, make their day, sign an autograph, she'll do it.

I think it begins in L.A., where she has really brought in this diverse population of people who are excited about her. But the more we're on TV, the more we're out playing in other places, you see it go to other areas, as well.

There was a moment in Colorado where we were on the bus getting ready to leave. There was a young girl standing outside who wanted an autograph. Our assistant coach came out and said, Ju, would you go outside? She said of course, and she comes outside, and as soon as she's signing that autograph, like 50 other people come running down a hill with their autographs. We're like, Whoa, get ready for this.

We've seen different moments along the way. I can't say enough about her demeanor and her grace kind of in handling everything. That's just who she is.

Q. It's worked out well for your program this year, but I'm curious, what do you think of the Ivy League not allowing a graduate year for players?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think that's the best rule in the history of rules (smiling). No, just kidding.

It's funny, I have a group chat with all of my teammates in college from even alums from other years that I didn't play with. Now they've totally gotten into our team, but the tournament. Someone asked that on the group chat. Actually our coach chimed in and said the Ivy League has long-standing philosophical things.

I think the idea is you're in college for four years, like the athletic opportunities don't out last your education there. I think it's a philosophical model.

No one was prepared for this COVID year thing. When the NCAA essentially said -- I think the NCAA didn't want people to opt out thinking the COVID year might look a little different. They said, We'll give everyone the year if you get through this year.

The Ivy League shut down. All of a sudden you either withdraw from school, which is when they wouldn't have an extra year, then you stay in school, no basketball, it just can't be at your institution. That's bigger than me, us. That's an Ivy League principle. That league obviously maintains a different kind of philosophical barometer than anyone else.

That's great for that league. Certainly these players have shown with an extra year, they have their Harvard degrees, Columbia degrees, Penn degrees. Now they have a year to experience something different.

I think it's wonderful on all ends for us. I think something that's notable about it in this transfer portal world where there's people feeling different ways bit, our three players have all been wildly supported by their programs. Some of you saw Carrie Moore, the coach at Harvard, flew out and surprised McKenzie Forbes at our game. Both the Columbia and Penn coaching staffs have been supportive of Kayla and KD.

How it's worked out for us has been great on the basketball end, but it's a cool story of what college basketball can be when players get the opportunity to experience everything. For us, it's worked out well.

Q. Ivy League question as well. Why is USC maybe uniquely positioned to take advantage of that quirk in the rules, even as an institution?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, USC I think is amazing on a lot of levels. One thing is we have some really incredible graduate programs that you can complete them and they're valued degrees in only a year or a year and a summer. So that was something, when I was taking the job, was also a bonus. I know the grad transfer thing is now more in play in college basketball in general.

The USC administration and our school, like, we want to be winning at academics and winning at athletics. That's something that helps us to do both. It's really something that's conducive to athletes who only have a year that want a real degree that means something and also the chance to play at USC. That was a factor for sure. All three of our players are getting a degree they can really use and connections they can make, but also this basketball experience.

The other thing I would say is I know everyone says the connection, I played in Ivy League. I could speak Ivy with them in these conversations and experiences. I also watched a lot of games, as a fan. I knew what these players could do. We didn't go to the portal and say we only want Ivy League players. We want players that can complement where we want to go. These skill sets they had were really useful. I saw they could do it at a high level no matter where they were playing before. I knew it really translated to the next level. They've shown that obviously in real-time.

Q. Speaking of your Ivy League kids, with McKenzie in particular, what are the ways in which you've seen her really grow since you recruited her, going back to the Cal days? How does she fit so well on and off the court?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I've known McKenzie since she's been 15, 16 years old. You could see back then two things. She was uniquely versatile on the court. There's not a lot of skills on the court she doesn't have. She can post you up a little bit, dribble, shoot, pass, left hand, right hand. You saw that. You also saw the high IQ.

Where she's grown, she really has completely changed her body. The year that she was off and I was in the NBA, watching the videos she would post, wow, she's committed to, like, changing her body. She's leaner, more mobile. Now she's a six-foot guard who doesn't really have limitations in terms of lateral speed or anything like that.

To her credit, she worked hard at that. I've also seen her grow in her confidence. All the things I saw as a 15-year-old, it's a 22-, 23-year-old, Kenzie being able to do that with an uber amount of confidence because she's always mind for the game.

She brings a ton to us on the floor. She understands her own position, everybody else's position, can help us organize on the court. She can take advantage of mismatches. She can help other people get to their spots. She's really said to me a number of times in the huddles, I think we can get JuJu here. It's a luxury for me to have a coach on the floor in that sense.

Off the court, she's confident. She's a winner. She's a selfless kid. She's a leader. She's really been able to connect with the older players on the team, also with JuJu and Rayah, and has the sixth sense about what it takes to get a team ready versus just getting herself ready.

Q. There's so many freshmen across the country who keep performing. Is it remarkable? Obviously they're talented, but for them to have so much poise, keep winning and making winning plays at their age?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It is remarkable. As a fan of the game watching players across the country, we get a front-row seat to JuJu every day, what she handles, what she does as a freshman. I really don't know if there's been a better freshman season by anyone ever, given everything she's done to elevate our program, everything that comes with it.

You watch, and Hannah has been spectacular, Madison Booker has been spectacular. The freshman at Fairfield who doesn't get as much exposure. There's been players in important roles on really good teams that have continued to perform, and to be as young as they are and terrific as they are, it's really something that's impressive.

Q. You're in this unique position, having been in the NBA for two years. Women's basketball is exploding. Why do you think now, suddenly? I appreciate you gave us credit as journalists. I don't think it's just us. Also, one thing that stands out, not to take anything away from the men's tournament, the women seem to play with a lot of joy and passion. That really brings fans in. Why do you think that is?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I don't think women's basketball has just arrived recently. I think the coverage and the eyes on it has arrived recently.

You put women's basketball on ABC, and you're going to get millions more watching it than before because it's on a platform, put more games on ESPN and people are talking about it. Now all of a sudden JuJu and Caitlin and Angel Reese are household names and people want to tune in. But they have to be able to see it somewhere.

Put more women's basketball on TV, and more people are going to want to watch and see it. Then we have these exciting players and storylines that captivate people when they see it.

Not the first time we've had those. Diana Taurasi was really, really exciting and a great personality. It just wasn't on as many households as it is now. That's the number one thing.

These players are living in the moment. I think most of them have been given the ability or the freedom to be themselves. I try with our players to put them on a platform to be their best selves. I think other coaches have done that as well. It's an exciting time in that sense because people get to see their gifts and talents on the court and their personalities, as well.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you all.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now from USC are our student-athletes.

We'll open up the floor for questions.

Q. Kenzie, is your whole family coming? I know that it sucks your brother got knocked out, but what have these last few weeks been like for your family to have both playing, be supporting each other?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, they'll all be here. I had to bum some tickets off some teammates. It's kind of like the culmination of our basketball careers. It's been pretty cool to, like, see it on a really successful note.

Obviously this is like the stuff we talked about as kids, Mason and I. He actually was out in L.A. this week. He got knocked off. Just watching our workouts and stuff. It's been really cool.

Just that support system in our family, obviously you can probably tell, means a lot to us. They're always showing out, so...

Q. We're in our last season of the Pac-12, and you are one of the teams representing the Pac-12 in the Sweet 16. Can you talk about what that means to you.

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, the Pac-12 I think growing up all of us on the West Coast, means a lot to us. That was the channel I was always watching in high school, hoping to be at that level.

Just to be a part of it this last year, all of us to be doing so well, and to take the tournament championship for the last one, I think means a lot.

RAYAH MARSHALL: The Pac-12 is all I've known since I was in college, I've been part of this conference. It's tough, one of the toughest conference there is. Especially this year, there were, what, six top-25 teams. All of them came and played in the NCAA tournament. It's been a ton of fun, really competitive. I feel it prepared us for the NCAA tournament appropriately.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I agree. It's my first year. I've loved the conference so far. It definitely has prepared us for what's to come. Yeah, so I'm glad I was able to be a part of it for my first and the last year of it.

Q. Rayah, Lindsay was in here talking about how you're trying to balance joy and urgency. How do you balance that? Seems like you don't care about the pressure, you're out here hooping.

RAYAH MARSHALL: For us, I feel like we've had an underdog mentality thus far. We're very humble about it. We were picked to finish sixth in our conference.

We live in L.A. There's so much to be happy about. Palm trees, it's sunny. We have fun doing what we do. We compete. Every day we just look to have fun. We compete in practice, but we look to have fun. When you're winning, it's a ton of fun.

Q. Kenzie, I'm curious, your perspective having gone through the transfer experience this time around, your perspective on the Ivy League not allowing graduate eligibility. If that had been an option, would you have looked at transferring, or was that only because that wasn't on the table?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, it's interesting. I think the grad year should be allowed for Ivys. I don't really see why not, whatever. I think it's been a cool experience for those of us who have had that extra year to explore other options.

I don't know, if there wasn't a rule, there's really no telling. It's a different reality.

I think it's pretty cool in the sense that you're transferring, but you couldn't stay, so you still have that support from your old staff and old school, which means a lot to me. Just kind of cool to have them supporting me on this, like, new journey.

Q. Ju, first of all, we heard because you're a freshman, you had to ride in the back of the car over here.

JUJU WATKINS: I'm sick of this seniority stuff (laughter).

We couldn't put Kenzie in the back, her knees are bad.

Q. Obviously you're known as a scorer. You are a very, very good defensive player.

JUJU WATKINS: Thank you.

Q. Is that something that was important to you before you started playing at SC and playing for Coach Beth Burns, or is it something that she has really helped develop?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I mean, I've always loved to block shots and stuff like that in high school. I think now, I would say I have to get better on defense, too. Coach B is always on my butt about it.

I just try to be the best for my team, really just help defensively. Yeah, I mean, it's just important. So yeah.

Q. JuJu, what has it been like working with Coach B, kind of learning her defensive gospel?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I mean, she always wants us to get better. I feel like she's never satisfied. Like, she always wants us to be a step better. We really appreciate that because we do feel like defensively you can always be better. She pushes us to be great.

Q. JuJu, I'm sure you've answered this five thousand times already this season, but what has it been like, obviously coming out of high school you have a lot of talent, but what gives you the mentality to come into college and have such a successful first season? Could you have ever imagined it?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I would just say I just think that just me making the decision to stay home, the great environment that I'm in, my teammates always pushing me to be better, everybody just wants the best for me. I think that has allowed me to really strive to be great and be in a place where I feel accepted.

I wouldn't say comfortable, but I just feel like I'm able to be the best version of myself. That's really helped me in my progress so far.

Q. What are you expecting from Baylor? What challenges do they present?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, they're a tough, scrappy team. They play with a fast pace. They rebound very well. I think we're just locked in on being disciplined, especially in transition, trying to get stops, then to win the rebounding battle.

RAYAH MARSHALL: I'm expecting it to be a dogfight. They're here. They're in the Sweet 16. Glad to be playing and competing against them. They're going to come out and bring everything they got. So will we.

We're going to play to our strengths and follow our game plan, come out there and compete tomorrow.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time.

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