

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

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Baylor Bears

Coach Nicki Collen

Darianna Littlepage-Buggs

Sarah Andrews

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Joining us for the Baylor press conference is head coach Nicki Collen.

Coach, begin with your opening statement.

NICKI COLLEN: Thanks for being here. Really excited to be in Portland. Certainly a goal of ours was to be here, whether it was here or Albany. Just excited with the level of competition, the city, everything. The Moda Center. Last time I was here, I watched Dame and CJ play.

Grateful to be here. Happy to take any questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Open-ended question. When it comes to scouting JuJu, what's the first thing that stands out?

NICKI COLLEN: She's really, really talented. I think when JuJu's in transition, that's the most challenging space. When she has space to operate, she's such a rhythm player. Very similar to Maddie Booker in our league. When she gets to her spots, really dangerous because of her size.

I think that's where it is. She's a rhythm player. Whether it's off the jab, whether it's off the bounce, she's just really, really good in isolations.

Probably, if you look analytically, plays in the highest volume of isolations of anybody in the country and does it pretty successfully.

Very good out-of-system player.



Q. Looking a little bit big picture, what does getting here mean in the bigger picture of your coaching career so far?

NICKI COLLEN: I think anytime you're hired into a position like Baylor, this is the expectation. I think it's about meeting expectations.

But my expectations aren't really driven necessarily by what people think they should be. It's more about wanting to be considered one of the best at what I do and how we do it.

I think it's just special to be with this group that's truly ours. These are not a bunch of inherited players that I'm winning with great players. These are players that believed in Baylor, believed in me, believed we could still be Baylor with Nicki Collen in charge.

It's about doing it our way but still being really, really successful doing it. Certainly we felt like we had the pieces to be here when the season started. It's about, for us, meeting those expectations.

Q. We talked a lot with Lindsay Gottlieb about how her experience in the NBA helped her coach JuJu. Do you think your W experience helps you in terms of prepping for a player who could start for the Pistons right now?

NICKI COLLEN: How about the Liberty? How about the Liberty, c'mon (smiling). Women's empowerment here.

I think the W was really, really good for me in general. I think it's a league where you have to scheme against the best game in and game out. You coach some of the best, but you have to scheme against the best.

It's always a chess match from one time to the next. You don't play anybody once. You have to make in-game adjustments. Nobody plays in a series at this level. It's that same concept of having to out-scheme, out-think, out-coach, out-work, and really in a lot of ways convince your players what will work.



Half our job in coaching is being good salesmen because it's about giving this blueprint of how we can be successful and getting them to believe if they do it, they will be successful, both individually and collectively. That's the biggest part of scouting, is getting them to believe if we do these three things, we have a really, really good shot to win this game.

I think the W is about spacing, it's about player personnel management, which is what our game is now collegiately. You feel confident and comfortable in late-game situations because, whether you're in the WNBA or the NBA, you're going to play four games a week, and three of them are going to be within five points. And you can get a 16-point lead, and at some point it's going to get to six, and you're going to have to use your timeouts wisely and save 'em.

I've probably called one defensive timeout in three years. Like, I believe in the importance of saving 'em. I feel like you can call a timeout on offense to set your defense because, to me, if you call a timeout on defense, the opposition is going to know they're getting ready to press, trap, they're going to look for this.

I think that's a big part of coaching at the pro level, is understanding the schemes in the late-game situations.

Q. Speaking of your time in the WNBA, Curt Miller posted a picture when you and Chris --

NICKI COLLEN: In a bathing suit, thanks, Curt (smiling).

Q. When you were on his staff in Connecticut, now going up against him in this next matchup, Chris, not Curt, what did you remember about his growth as a coach?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I'm going to call Curt out first. Let's be honest, he's here to scout, he's not here to support us (smiling).

I mean, I think Chris is one of those, like, you get in this profession, and I hope that people saw me this way, like wow, she's really young, but she knows what she's doing, she's got a bright future in this profession.

I think Chris made a really unique and tough transition, honestly, with the Sun because when you're a young -- he was probably 26 when Curt hired him. He was our op/video/did a little bit of everything. When you make that transition and you're working with players who are older than you, and then you move into a assistant coaching position, then a defensive coordinator position, it shows you, like, that's not an easy transition for 30-year-olds to

look at this young guy and say, Yeah, I really want to listen to him.

He's really, really talented. I was excited to see him move over to Lindsay's staff. He loves Southern Cal. He's a New York boy, but when he was at USC the first time, I think fell in love with being out in L.A.

I just think he adds a lot to their bench. It's just good to be around people that you love. This profession is so small, so being around the people that you really care about, that helped you. Curt made me ready to be a head coach. Being a defensive coordinator and him allowing me the autonomy to be in huddles, sit in front, diagram stuff, I think was one of the reasons why the Atlanta Dream felt like she's ready. She's been in those huddles, made those decisions.

I owe a lot to a lot of people in this profession for getting me where I'm at.

Q. Given your experience in the pros and now back in the college level, do you see this year's freshman class in particular as being the transcendent group that can help the sport grow moving forward?

NICKI COLLEN: We've talked a lot about the momentum that we have in women's sports, not just basketball, but in general. Like the explosion based on Caitlin Clark. But I think this freshman class, I watched Hannah Hidalgo play with Philly Rise, was a big fan, but really had no idea that she would be this good this quickly, really all the different ways. Certainly I thought she would be an add-on D and get to the rim, but the way she's done it, the way she's led, the way they played in their round of 32 game, Notre Dame looked like a machine.

I think it's a class when you think back to the Skylar, Elena, Griner class, the big three coming into the W, the impact that all three of those players have made, I think it's a group that can really, really be special.

They're all unique. They're different. But they all play an exciting brand of basketball. I think that's what stands out. Not just that they're productive, but that they're fun to watch.

I think when you watch our game, you get a lot, Oh, women's basketball is great 'cause it's a little old school, they move the ball, this and that. I think these guys are fundamentally sound, but they're exciting. I think that is good for our game.

Q. After the game against Virginia Tech, you said you let your team play, weren't calling a lot of plays. How



much of that is the trust you have in your players at this point in the season? How much of that is just the fact that they've learned from you where they also just kind of trust you?

NICKI COLLEN: I think there are a couple things that went into play.

First of all, it was so loud in there, there was no way to call plays. I thought our advantage against Virginia Tech was our athleticism and our speed. So slowing Jada Walker down in transition to call a play wouldn't have been a good choice.

I think there's a time and a place. I thought we really executed at a high level out of timeouts. So I think there's time and space to, like, really get them to understand and execute.

I think one of the things that I learned a little bit about this team kind of in the midst of our losing streak is that we're not a great execution team when I have to slow 'em down and we have to go from A to B and B to C. We're better playing in action, early action, playing off the second action. If our drags and step-ups are good, it doesn't matter after that. We're going to get an advantage off a drift pass, someone trailing the play.

I thought in that game Sarah Andrews really led us early when they were in zone. I thought we shot them out of their zone quickly, which was good. Jada playing downhill, we knew she had an advantage as good as Georgia Amoore is, we felt like we could get her in ball screens, be really, really effective.

You can't overcomplicate the game for 18- to 22-year-olds, you just can't. I think that's something that I've learned about this group, is the less I call, the better they execute.

Q. Obviously JuJu is the focal point of USC. What else do you see that led to their success as a team?

NICKI COLLEN: McKenzie Forbes, Padilla, Marshall, Davis. I think they all understand their roles. I mean, a year ago, I watched Columbia play I feel like 40 times. I know they didn't play that many games. It felt like it because, one, they made the big run in the NIT. We knew they were a bunch of kids that couldn't come back and play their COVID year at Columbia.

Whether it was Jaida Patrick, Davis, we were watching them. Davis was a scorer. I know she's had some injuries, but she's kind of owned this "I'm going to get on the glass" role and I'm going to screen and run.

I think they play well off one another. You have Batman and Robin with Forbes. I don't see her as an understudy; I see her as a player that makes plays for them.

Forbes, if she gets hot from three, it gets scary. Padilla, you can't give an open shot. Knows her role. Marshall, their leading scorer a year ago, settled in, sometimes gets a lot of touches, sometimes rebounds because she doesn't even make it down before a shot goes up in transition.

Then defensively I just don't think they beat themselves. They've got length. Even though they're not super deep and they don't play a ton of players, I think their length bothers people in gaps. Marshall is a rim protector. I don't think they beat themselves at the defensive end.

Then I think they're never out of a game. You watch the Arizona game, they're down 10, the next thing you know it's a one-point game. They can really heat it up, especially in transition.

Q. Is there any interesting story behind coming to a Blazers game?

NICKI COLLEN: Actually, my GM and I came out to watch the Civil War series when Sabrina and Satou were seniors. Destiny Slocum was at Oregon State. Both my video coordinator and my athletic trainer worked for the Trail Blazers. Jessica Cohen had come, had left the Dream to work for the Trail Blazers. We came into town a day early to go to a Trail Blazer game, to see former staff.

Yeah, we were just in town. That was the weekend we lost Kobe, too. It was a pretty memorable weekend. I was trying to get back to the Nines because that place was so nice. Anyway, yeah.

Q. On the topic of WNBA experience, do you think it was helpful the way the rules in the college game ended up aligning with the pro game with quarters...

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I think it's good for our game in general. I think whether it's FIBA rules, kind of aligning the similar rules, as players are growing up, they understand them. We had players playing USA Basketball playing different rules than they were going to play in college.

I think it's good for our game. I think it makes end-of-game situations... In the women's game, when you had 3.5 seconds to go, you were rarely going to get a shot up if you had to go end to end. If you were, it was going to be a contested 30-footer at best.

Now to have the opportunity to create a late-game situation, you could see how frustrated I was when it was

1.8 and Kenny had a free timeout because of a clock issue. I know, I know.

That's how good I think Kenny is in that situation. It's a one-possession game, 1.8 seconds. One missed switch, you get a three, you're playing overtime.

I think it's an exciting part of the game that I do think is both good for our game but also something that I enjoy coming back to be able to continue to do.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much.

NICKI COLLEN: All right.

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

We'll open it up to questions.

Q. Being such a balanced team offensively, how do you feel that can help you in a situation like going into tomorrow's game where any player could take on the matchups?

SARAH ANDREWS: I think you said it best. I think it's hard to scheme for us because we have so many people that can score. Whoever's our top leading scorer doesn't have to have a great night every night because we have so many people that can go anywhere else and be a top scorer. That's the beauty about this team.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Piggyback off what she said, you really have to play honest and be on your Ps and Qs because anybody can go off.

Q. Sarah, you're the only player that Coach Collen didn't recruit. What about her made you stay? How would you describe her as a coach?

SARAH ANDREWS: I stayed because, for one, she's been where I wanted to be. At the end of the day, she's coached in that league. She's built me as a player, helped me with my confidence. I want to go to the league at the end of the day. No doubt in my mind I wanted to stay and play for her.

She's an amazing coach, a player's coach. She knows our tendencies, what we like to do, don't like to do. We play the game at a different type of speed just because of where she came from. Playing for her is amazing because at the end of the day we all got the same goal: that's to go to the league.

Q. Sarah, you talked about it, but how much does that

pace help you guys in a situation like this? Does it give you an advantage?

SARAH ANDREWS: I think it does. When we play defense, first of all, it starts for us on defense because our offense is so easy. We push the ball in transition. Sometimes we don't even call plays, we play all of drags and stuff. When we get the ball in transition, we're deadly. We don't have to call plays, we just play in transition.

Q. Going up against JuJu, what have you been focusing on in the scout? Coach is scout-heavy. What are the messages you're getting so far?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Got to play hard. I mean, we have to stop JuJu, but we have to stop everybody else on the team, as well. I wouldn't just say there's anything in particular. We just have to play hard all night. She's going to make some tough shots. We just have to live with those shots and keep on playing.

Q. Buggs, how important is it to have players like Sarah, Jana, that have been in this bigger environment to lean on?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: It's really great because they have the experience. They're also people I look up to. In those situations, they can get us to calm down. We listen to them in those moments.

They're always there to keep you, Hey, we're still in this, game time, we're good, we're here.

It's just great to lean on them knowing they have experience and knowing they've been in these situations before, they know what can happen, what we need to do, what we need to execute.

It's just great to know and have that knowledge.

Q. Coming off of conference play, what do you feel like were the biggest things you were able to take from that that make you play your best basketball right now?

SARAH ANDREWS: Actually I'm kind of glad we hit adversity then rather than now. I'd rather learn from those mistakes early on in the season rather than coming into March, losing the first game, so...

I think we've grown as a team. I'm starting to see that team that came out and went 13-0. Most of all, we grew. We could have folded, been done early in the first game after the tournament, could have folded in the first game coming into March Madness.



We came in with a different type of firepower, different look in our eyes. We're going to continue to take it one game at a time.

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: A lot of growth there. It helped us build for moments like this. Now it's time for the nitty-gritty. Like she said, if we hadn't hit that adversity early on, we wouldn't be as successful as we are now. It helped us grow and show in a lot of areas that we needed to improve in.

Q. It's not just JuJu Watkins, it's a very solid team, especially defensively. What have you talked about in terms of getting the ball moved around with a solid defense?

DARIANNA LITTLEPAGE-BUGGS: Set screens. We have to be very intentional I feel like. We have to get those little details in there. I think that's what's going to separate us and help us be successful, is those little details, really being intentional about what we're doing on the court.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

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