

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

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

## USC Trojans

### Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

### Rayah Marshall

### JuJu Watkins

### McKenzie Forbes

#### Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. With four minutes left in the game, your head coach called you over and said something to you for a minute there. And then after that it seemed like it was clutch play after clutch play, whether it was assisting, rebounding, free-throw line. What did she say to you, and what, if anything, did it change in that moment for you?**

JUJU WATKINS: I'm not going to lie, I don't really remember. I think it was just a collective sense of urgency. I mean, just knowing what was on the line and our position, us being down during that stretch. So it was just a matter of turning the game around. And I know I had to do something.

So I was glad that I got the opportunity to help my team with some free throws and stuff like that.

**Q. For Rayah, you guys have not been in this spot before. Did you learn something about yourselves today, or was it -- did you already know going in that you guys would be able to handle a situation in a game like this in a close game down the stretch?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: I have faith in my team because we've faced diversity a ton of times. And when we are against diversity, our back's up against the wall, we actually rise to the occasion. I mean, these two are extreme competitors.

So they're coming into huddles before Coach G. can even tell us our next direction, saying what we need to do.

If I'm in a dogfight, I would rather be in a dogfight with this team.

**Q. Ju, I know you were giving Kenzie a hard time yesterday about being old and not being able to get in the back of the van and whatnot. But she's a pretty important player. And I wondered, what have you learned from her and all her wisdom?**

USC - 74, Baylor - 70

THE MODERATOR: USC with the 74-70 win over Baylor. Joining us in the post-game press conference, head coach Lindsay Gottlieb along with student-athletes Rayah Marshall, JuJu Watkins and McKenzie Forbes. Coach, congratulations on the win. Go ahead with your opening statement and we'll open it up for questions for the student-athletes.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you all. That was a heck of a basketball game. First I want to credit Baylor who came out and were a terrific version of what they're really good at, and I think that speaks a lot to their players and their coaching staff, getting here and then on this stage being a really good version of themselves.

I'm so proud of our team. We're in the Elite 8. We have an incredible group of young people who just care about winning more than anything else. We had to gut check them a little bit after the third quarter. And to me, when you can come out with a win, that's the greatest thing of all, that we took a little hit there. We got popped in that third quarter. And we came back and regrouped and decided we have to be a really good version of us because Baylor's coming with everything they have. And I thought that was the difference, our response in the fourth quarter.

So super proud and excited. And the main thing is we want to keep going with this team. I want to stay with them as long as we possibly can. So we're excited to be practicing tomorrow and playing on Monday.



JUJU WATKINS: Man, she's like Yoda.

[Laughter]

No, she's just super smart. All the ivies, but Kenzie, especially, I think we have a special relationship, that rookie-type vibe. But she's always just encouraging me and really speaking to me in times when I need it during the game. So she's just a great leader. And I'm just glad to have that type of leadership my first year.

**Q. For any of the players. It seemed like any time you guys needed a big play, especially defensively in the fourth quarter, Kaitlyn Davis was there. What can you say about her effort throughout the comeback?**

McKENZIE FORBES: Can y'all hear me? Yeah, I think that's who Kaiti is as a player. She's always going to make the gritty, the tough play. And I think wherever -- whatever team she's on, obviously, I battled her last year. Wherever she goes, she brings that with her, so that doesn't surprise me at all. And those plays are huge for us down the stretch. We depend on her, and it -- I definitely don't take it for granted. I don't think any of us do. She was huge.

**Q. For JuJu, obviously, we see 30 points, the defensive matchups that you took in the fourth quarter. I still think one of the more underrated aspects of your game is your playmaking and not just necessarily getting assists but knowing when to make the right reads there. How has that part of your game just developed a little bit throughout this season and here into the tournament?**

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah. I mean, I would say it's still developing. I think that even though I had 30, it wasn't my best night. But, honestly, just doing whatever it is to win, I think that's priority always.

So whether it's defensively, making the right play, getting off of it, stuff like that, just whatever I need to do.

**Q. Rayah, you made that free throw at the end to put the game out of reach. Can you take us through that moment, especially playing in a pro-level arena in the Sweet 16?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: So believe it or not, I didn't purposely try to do that. I always look for JuJu and Kenzie. I seen a ton of green jerseys around JuJu. Before I could get off it, it was Baylor jerseys swarming me. I go to the line. I remember just watching JuJu at the line all game. I was praying, God, please let her make this, please let her make this. You know what? Now it's my turn. Let me call

in my inner JuJu, knock down this first free throw, and after that I just kind of rejoiced.

**Q. JuJu, that fourth quarter, I think about four minutes left, tie game, you go down in transition. And there's two defenders in front of you. You don't look anywhere else. You just go right at them and attack. And obviously at that point you're not shooting well from the floor. What in your mentality in that moment and just in that fourth quarter, in general, just allows you to kind of keep pushing in those moments and be confident in yourself?**

JUJU WATKINS: I mean, it really all boils down to the trust that everybody has in me. Despite me not shooting well tonight, I think that when the game's on the line, I think my teammates trust in me to attempt a bucket, and luckily we came out on top with that one.

Man, we just want to win. And whatever it is I can contribute or try to do for the team, I'm going to do it.

**Q. For McKenzie and Rayah, kind of the similar question there. Even if Juju's not having her best night, knowing that she has before made those game-winning plays or really clutch plays in the right moments, where have you seen that really develop the most, and how much trust do you have in her that even if she's not shooting well, that she'll be able to do what it takes to help you guys win?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: She's a competitor. I can trust her with my life. Like, when it come down to winning, she going to do what she has to do. She's coming into the huddle after third quarter fired up, like, let's get our shit -- sorry about that. Well, that's what she said, but let's get ourselves together. And so, like, with that, of course we're going to trust --

[Laughter]

-- trust what she had to say.

McKENZIE FORBES: I'd just add on to that, Juju's a winner and we see the work she puts in. We don't lack confidence. We have all the trust in the world. Like I said before, she's a playmaker. She gets off the ball when they come to her, getting our bigs a lot of easy dump-downs. We've seen that time and time again throughout the season, all the way back to when we played Penn State in the Bahamas.

**Q. JuJu, you went to the free-throw line seven times in the fourth quarter. You already talked about how your confidence stayed there. But how do you stay calm in**

**those type of moments?**

JUJU WATKINS: I think just knowing what's on the line. I mean, I wasn't really able, like I said, not the best shooting night for me, so I had to make sure I capitalized off of easy and free buckets, honestly. I always practice free throws. We practice in practice. So it's really nothing new. So, yeah.

**Q. Kenzie, I know you've had quite a circuitous route throughout college basketball. But I just wondered, you seem to have played with a lot of joy. How much fun are you having this year, and I wondered who was the -- when you kissed -- waved a kiss to the crowd, blue a kiss to the crowd after that three, who was that for?**

McKENZIE FORBES: That was for all the Trojan fans. I feel like we had a great showing of Trojan fans, by the way. My whole family is out there. I'm having the best time of my life. This is by far the most fun season of basketball I've ever had, and I think it has everything to do with my teammates and the staff. And, obviously, winning is really fun, too.

**Q. JuJu, you struggled with shooting today. How much of that was an off day, and how much of it was their defensive effort?**

JUJU WATKINS: My mean, the defense was great, very competitive. We knew Baylor was going to bring the heat. They're known for their defense. But me just having confidence in what I'm able to do, I would say it was an off night for me personally.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations on the win. Thank you very much for being here. Student-athletes are dismissed.

All right. We'll open it up to questions now for Coach Gottlieb.

**Q. Lindsay, how impactful was Rayah tonight, you know, just as far as kind of imposing her will early, seven first-quarter rebounds, and how key has she been down the stretch for this team?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Well, you can see that she's a joy to be around. And that's pretty much Rayah all the time. But we knew that her imposing her will in the paint was going to be important. I mean, I looked at the stat sheet, and I was, like, wow, you had 16 rebounds. I'm not surprised because she was out there swooping everything up.

You know, I thought she was terrific this practice getting

ready for this, understanding her assignment. She finished. I thought she was really, really good. And, again, I've said this before, she and Clarice play off each other really well. Clarice came in and gave us really excellent minutes as well. I thought that was one of the differences in the game that we felt like our size could help us.

**Q. Coach, the entire last minute, Baylor was just staying in reach. What were you telling your team to how to stay calm during those time-outs?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, as the players said, we've been in a lot of close games and a lot of situations. So I don't think I'm coaching poise. I don't. I feel like Kenzie's just next level, Yoda's a good word. But JuJu, I mean, I think that's what a lot of you guys are alluding to. She just has a poise about her. We've been in a lot of situations. So it was less coaching their mentality and more trying to coach what was going on. We obviously gave up that three, but it was more tactical. Like, are we switching? Are we staying? What do they need to do and how do we get a stop? Because I do think they understand what it's like to be in close games and how to finish a game, how to close it out.

**Q. You kind of alluded to this earlier. Baylor does such a good job of creating space on offense. What did you guys have to shift as the game went on to just take away that space?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: There were a couple different things. Quite honestly, I thought their monstrous third quarter had a lot to do with our shot selection and our kind of impatience on offense. They're really good defensively. They're very athletic, and they brought a lot of bodies.

And, like, they know, I have so much trust -- obviously Kenzie and JuJu in transition and all of our playmakers. We took a couple tough ones, and it was harder, the floor was unbalanced and they were good. So I really got on them about just making the right play. When you're loose in transition, let's go. Some of our sets were getting us backdoor looks and freeing us up a little bit better. So a lot of it was on our shot selection. Then we knew it's win or go home. Do we want to get stops or not? We really locked in. K-Will coming in helped us a lot because, I mean, Kayla Padilla just plays her tail off and she was exhausted. So K-Will coming in when Walker got hot was huge. I thought our bigs locking in on their screen coverages. We just made it a little bit tougher on them in the fourth than we did on the third and it was a balance between our offense getting better and our defense locking in.

**Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you the same question about JuJu and her playmaking. Not necessarily**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**assists, but the hockey assists. She draws two on the ball and knows where to pass it to. She's got someone shading her and she makes the right read. What can you say about how important that is when she gets into that mode when she's able to make those reads like that?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's unbelievable what she handles. You cannot put one person on her. She will score. You can't really put two. You have to show a lot of bodies. And again, for her to end up with 30 and 4 assists on not her best shooting night, I do think she's feeling the floor incredibly well. I don't know if she would describe it that way, but we talk about reads and next-level reads and trusting your teammates and just making the right play. And I think she's always been really capable of that. I mean, I don't think she came in only as a scorer, only as a passer or rebounder. But I think what's evolved is just seeing the court and understanding where she needs to get the ball and what reads she can make out of that.

The conversation at four minutes, it was me asking her. I'm trying to empower her more, where can I get it to you? Like, I didn't love her at the top and they could just throw a body. That's when I started trying to get it to her elbow and let her make plays there. I think that's when she dived one to somebody off that drive and she gets in her space. How can I get it to make it difficult on defense and easy for her to see her reads? And other people do a really good job of playing off of her as well.

**Q. I don't know how much there is left to say about Kenzie at this point, but I'm just wondering about the joy she plays with, and like you said, her poise. She's played basketball for a long time, but she hasn't been in these type of situations. So where does it come from?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think some of it is innate. She's confident because she also puts the work in. Confidence is earned with how much work you do. Some of it, I just think is personality. She loves to hoop. She loves talking basketball. I've said it before. She's going to be an NBA or WNBA GM sooner than later if that's what she wants to do. We talk about that stuff all the time. She really understands it.

But I love seeing the joy. She loves to hoop. She'd rather be doing this even with a Harvard degree probably more than school work, right? She feeds off the positive energy from everybody else. She leads us. It's really fun. I mean, it's what college basketball's supposed to be.

So I think it's a mix of confidence and high IQ and just joy for her teammates and playing basketball.

**Q. You mentioned Kayla Williams coming off the bench. How much of a lift has she been, especially late in the season, coming back from that off-season surgery for you guys in a time you really need some of that defensive spark?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's been tremendous. I mean, she played 32 minutes a game or something last year, right? And then she had four months where she didn't -- couldn't do much because of her injury and then come back. We sort of were formulated at that point, right? And so to her credit, she's been incredibly selfless, team-first kid, trying to find her rhythm and her role. We've talked about -- we know in that locker room, she is incredibly valued because even in kind of shorter stints, she's come in and won us games. I can go back to at Cal, changed the tempo of the game. Arizona. She just can do different things on the ball defensively and different things breaking down a defense. I mean, those 8, 10, 12 minutes, whatever it is, are valuable. And we wouldn't be where we are without any of those wins that has led us to here.

And so it's really, I think, a cool story. And I keep telling the players, when you win, no one remembers how many minutes you play or points you scored, really. They remembered who's a winner. Everyone gets a ring if you get a ring. And so I think her contributions have been unbelievable for us.

**Q. Coach, you got Clarice involved early in the game. She had some quality minutes there at the beginning of the second quarter. Considering Baylor is not the tallest team and Clarice obviously had a great game against Kansas, was getting her involved early part of your game plan?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: For sure. Just to speak again about our depth, we obviously played the starters pretty heavy minutes, but we have quality depth, and we're really confident in who we're bringing in. I think they're confident now in their roles. And credit to Clarice. It's a different thing to be kind of banging a 6'6" player and then sort of chasing a smaller player in space. I think she did a really good job of coming in and giving good minutes. Kaiti hit fouls. I played Rayah and Clarice together some. Yeah, we have a lot of belief in what she brings to us. And I thought she gave really, really good minutes.

**Q. I know this isn't anything new, but just the amount of attention JuJu gets, not just on the court but a camera following her pregame and all of us talking to her all the time, how impressed with you with the way she handles that and still performs on top of it?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's hard to put into words. Again, as a freshman, you see it. The poise is innate for her. What's who she is. She doesn't -- you know, we track, obviously, their catapults and all that. And she plays so hard. She's always exerting the most energy. But in terms of you can just measure someone's kind of pulse, she just is even-keeled, and it's really cool, the way that she plays. She cares. She's a winner. Nobody's going to rattle her. Not officials, not another team. Not teammates. It's something to see, and I think it's what makes her a great one and is going to make her one of the greatest ones.

The off the court stuff is also unbelievable. I've said this before. JuJu is not a reality star who also plays basketball. She is a hooper, a savant, an artist on the court who is gaining a lot of attention, as she should. But she keeps the main thing the main thing. She's unbelievable with fans. We saw this one girl was crying as she was signing. It was really cool. Our A.D. said it's like a Taylor Swift moment. No, it's a JuJu moment. The flocks are coming to see her in Galen Center, and she just handles that beautifully because I think she understands her importance on a larger picture to the community.

And yet she does that while keeping the main thing the main thing. I credit JuJu and her circle around her. I think they really have done an unbelievable job.

THE MODERATOR: Unfortunately we are out of time, Coach. Thank you very much.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you all. Thank you, guys.

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