

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

Jada Walker

Sarah Andrews

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

USC - 74, Baylor - 70

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now from Baylor, head coach Nicki Collen along with student-athletes Jada Walker and Sarah Andrews.

Coach, an incredibly hard-fought game. We'll start with opening statements and then we'll open it up to the student-athletes.

NICKI COLLEN: I thought it was a really great game. The lead changes, the runs, I thought when you look at the box score, I thought we did a lot of things really well. We won almost every statistical category except free throws, both taken and made.

So clearly the difference in the game was the foul line. But I thought these guys battled like crazy against JuJu, made her inefficient, made her make tough shots, take tough shots, make tough shots.

I thought at the beginning of the game, our transition "D," our squeezing wasn't great and I thought it got better as the game went along. I thought we made a few mistakes, but I think there's always going to be a game slippage in a moment this big.

And I thought they got a heavy dose of Baylor basketball in the second half. I thought we looked a little -- the moment was a little big for us in the first half. And then I thought we really settled down and played really good basketball in the second half. I thought the ball was moving. The ball had energy. I thought we were battling at the defensive end.



You know, to out-rebound a team that has more size than us at absolutely every position, I thought we were relentless on the boards. I thought one rebound there with five seconds to go on the shot clock and 29 seconds in the game, I think if that's a two-point game and we were on the same play to get Sarah a three that we saved in our back pocket all season, we may be on the winning side of this.

But super proud of these guys and their effort. I thought they both had big stretches. I thought Jada got going there and was heating it up off the bounds and Sarah from three in the second half to really create separation.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions to student-athletes.

Q. Sarah, how have you seen this team grow from game one to where you're at now? Because you're a very different team than the start of the season.

SARAH ANDREWS: Honestly, I think we shocked a lot of people. Nobody thought that we would be here. We started out 13-0. We hit adversity once we got into the conference. And then hit adversity at the Big 12 tournament.

But I think overall we grew in a way that nobody would ever believe. We became tighter, became sisters. I think you saw, in the last game, in moments where we would have turned the ball over late in the game, we stuck it out against Virginia Tech. Jada came down the stretch and made big plays. Yaya, Buggs. I could go on and on about this team. That's the main reason I'm coming back next year. To play with a group like this, it was a great year.

Q. And then, Jada, what will you remember most about this team, and specifically for you, the way you finished the season? How much momentum does that give you?

JADA WALKER: Definitely our fight. I really enjoy how much this team fights on and off the court. But especially in big moments, we really fought in this game. I know calls weren't going our way, but we continued to fight. We got down one, took the lead, off lead, took the lead. It's a



game of runs. We went on one. We tried to the end. But for me, personally, I feel like I had a great turnaround from the beginning of the season to now, just hitting shots, being more confident in myself, not turning the ball over as much and really just watching Sarah, how she leads and trying to take on that role more and more as we go on in the season, so proud.

Q. Sarah, I'm curious now about that play, presumably the three to get it within one. Is that something you had been running in practice all year based on what Coach said? And what did you think of the look that was after that that would have potentially tied the game?

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah. That was something we've been practicing the past week, few weeks. It was a great call by Coach. When I shot the ball, I thought I was off balance. I thought I air-balled and it went in. Took the last shot. I had confidence when I took it. I had hit one and two earlier in the game back to back. So I took that shot with confidence and I knew the team was behind me when I took that shot. There was no doubt in my mind when I shot it. Basketball, you win some, you lose some. I shot a confident shot, and I'm okay with that.

Q. For both of you. Yesterday we talked about it, y'all went into this matchup with that underdog mentality, fully embracing it. What kind of message do you guys think you sent today? Obviously, it came up just short, but what kind of message overall do you think you guys sent?

JADA WALKER: Really that we can compete with anybody. I know we're the underdog. I know people don't pick us to win necessarily, but we're going to come out and fight, and we're going to keep continuing to try to upset whoever's put in front of us. So I'm really proud of our team and the way we played.

SARAH ANDREWS: Yeah, to piggyback off that, I think people are going to be scared for next season. I think everybody's going to be looking to see how Baylor grows. We put everybody on alert. That was a great moment for us. I think a lot of people grew in this game. We grew, but most of all we put a lot of people on alert for next year.

Q. Sarah, you and Buggs going back and forth in that fourth quarter to get it back. What was your mentality and how did you guys claw your way back?

SARAH ANDREWS: We weren't going to go down without a fight. We were right there. They don't want to give us five more minutes because it might be a different outcome. So I think we were going to give it all we got. But I think

Buggs stepped up and she hit big-time shots that built confidence in me. We were just playing in the moment of we're not going down without a fight.

Q. For either player, does anything kind of stand out from, USC had an 8-0 run to kind of take control late in the game. Any moment or any play that stands out that you wonder what might have been there?

SARAH ANDREWS: I think they went on that run, I think that was coming out of the third quarter. They hit some big shots. They got some really talented players. I think she just hit some big shots.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for our student-athletes? All right. Thank you very much for your time and congratulations on a great season.

SARAH ANDREWS: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll open it up to questions now for Coach Cullen.

Q. Coach, at the end of the game, is that kind of how you drew it up, that last look that Sarah got?

NICKI COLLEN: You know, I don't know which one you're talking to. When we were down four, we ran a play with the slip handoff that Sarah hit the three to cut it to one. The next play, they had been pulling downhill. When we got downhill, I thought they were going to leave Dre. We just set a flat screen. We had a triple screen along the baseline really that was dummy action to occupy the baseline people. And we were just trying to set a flat high ball screen, let Sarah play downhill, and hopefully throw it back to Dre.

I don't think Sarah got clean off the screen. We didn't clear space. So we didn't drag them either in a switch, because even when people switch, oftentimes they'll float a level ball. So even if they would have switched, I thought Sarah could get downhill against their big, and we might have been able to pitch back.

I thought Dre makes threes in the middle of the floor. And oftentimes late in games, it's easier to get your big shots than it is your littles. Especially with the length that they have. There's a lot of different actions you can run in those situations. I just thought that was the cleanest opportunity for us to potentially get a look.

So, no, it wasn't designed to look like that. But then I think we just -- we freelanced from there, and Sarah tried to make a play. Super proud of her for wanting to take it. It's not easy to be the one to take those shots.

Q. You highlighted the free throw disparities. Is there something you feel like you could have done differently to close that gap?

NICKI COLLEN: No. I mean, it's not like we only took threes. There were 43 shots inside the arc. So there were plenty of opportunities. When you look at the second half, the only time they called a foul, shooting foul, was on a pullup jump shot. So all of the times we drove the ball downhill, all the times it was either a block or the ball went out of bounds or it was nothing.

So we took a lot of twos. We weren't unaggressive, taking the ball to the basket. So I just don't think we got the same whistle.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Jada, just transferring over that momentum from Virginia Tech and coming through with some clutch mid-range shots?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah. I thought early she got downhill, and then I thought she looked really, really tired. And I took her out and kind of challenged her. She kind of has to get her second wind sometimes.

But I thought -- she's such a fearless competitor. She makes tough shots. I thought the shots she made, kind of circus shot going into the fourth quarter, she was hitting jump shots. You know, she kind of made them take Padilla out which made them sometimes easier to guard. Because when they go to Kayla Williams, you have someone you can help off of a little bit more. Padilla's going to strike a three if you let her. We've just seen her in so many close games hit big threes.

But I think the nature of how Jada was playing forced them to go to a defensive lineup. So I think Jada started to get the sense -- I mean, when Jada came to Baylor, she had played two years at Kentucky and had played no point guard. Rhyn Howard played there freshman year and Maddie Scherr played there her sophomore year. It's not easy -- I'm not easy to play for when it comes to point guards. And I don't say that because I'm mean or nasty or anything like that.

But I want our point guards to think the game. I want them to flow into action. I want them -- we're not a come down the floor, pass it to the wing and cut away in space. Like, that's not what I want to coach. That's not how we play. So you've got to learn to play in drags.

You've got to learn to play in step-ups, learn to have a big voice. And Jada has a really, really quiet voice. So challenging her at all times to really use her voice and

understand why I would run what I run, why are we staggering here? Who are we staggering for? Who do we loop to the top? Who do I want to ball screen? We had talked all night long, we wanted Padilla in ball screens. We wanted Padilla and Marshall in ball screens together in particular.

So really gaining an understanding. So I think for Jada, she just came so far in terms of what the expectations are for point guards in our program. And you should love to be a point guard in our program, but it's not an easy position.

But as the season wound down, it was very much Jada, get in the lane and create. Like, get in the lane and look for your jump shot. And I thought the more confidence she got taking her jump shot, I mean, when I looked down and saw she had seven assists and I thought we blew some layups, she passed. I mean, she played a really good floor game. And she also is just a menace on "D." You know, if you look at that game, they did not want to bring the ball down the floor with whoever she was defending.

So that's why Forbes brought it down or JuJu brought it down because they didn't want to face her pressure.

Q. How did you feel about your defensive effort on JuJu in terms of making her work for points holding down?

NICKI COLLEN: Yeah, I thought we were great. I thought we started slow. I thought we didn't really understand how much we had to squeeze in transition, how much we had to bring congestion. I thought she got early, clean looks. Had three quick baskets.

And then you look at the rest of the game. We've probably fouled her too much.

But ultimately she hit a couple shots in a row there to start the third when it was just kind of back and forth, and no one could stop each other.

I thought Bella did an unbelievable job. I think Bella didn't score a lot of points tonight. But I thought Bella's length, her contest. She certainly hit a couple, but for the most part, Buggs switched off on her a little bit. But she was Bella's probably 90% of the night. So I thought Bella did a great job guarding her.

Q. Talking about JuJu aside, how did you guys game plan particularly for Forbes and knowing she can come down in transition and pull up at any given time? How do you feel you did on her and the rest of USC's kind of perimeter threats?

NICKI COLLEN: I thought we made two huge mistakes on Forbes when she can walk into threes in transition. They're not a -- our mistakes were from our post. Sometimes when a shot goes up, USC's not a team that consistently has a rim runner. So they don't put pressure on the rim with a post sprinting down the middle of the floor very often.

And so a lot of times, as our posts were running back, they needed to take her both times that she got threes. She walked through threes. We had people back. We just didn't get matched up.

So I thought that was our biggest mistake on her. I thought we did a good job on her outside of that. We knew JuJu was going to get shots. We're not going to block all her shots or keep her from taking shots. We wanted to make her inefficient, and we did that. We thought she'd take 30 shots. And so it was obviously right there.

But we thought we could do a good job on Padilla. We thought we could do a good job on Forbes.

Padilla's two shots in the first half came on offensive rebounds where we didn't secure rebounds. We guarded her really, really well in the half court. So it's those broken plays. Ball, offensive rebound, kickout one more type of plays.

And then I thought she had a huge drive there at the end. I think she surprised Jada with kind of the rip drive three-point play. She doesn't make a lot of twos. And certainly doesn't make a lot of playmaking-type twos. So that was a big shot by her, a big momentum swing, because it was a 6-0 run that included that and one that was maybe the difference, if we don't foul, or it's our ball with 28 seconds to go.

THE MODERATOR: This will be our last question.

Q. Coach, Dre was talking about it, how thankful she is for you that you took a chance on her this season. For you specifically just reflecting back, how special was this run with this team for you?

NICKI COLLEN: Dang it, Nicole (tearing up). Special enough that I want to play on Monday. Yeah. I think I've stayed really, really composed since the game ended, because I just think we were in position to win the game. Like, I just felt like I had zero doubt that we had what it took to beat that team. And I have a lot of respect for Lindsay, and one of my closest friends is on that staff. And I love Chris Koclanes so much.

And I think they've had such an unbelievable turnaround

season. But I just -- I'm going to ride or die for mine. And I think we were the better team. And I think we had moments that they couldn't guard us and moments that we looked so fluid and so special, and we competed.

I just wanted this one for those kids. But I wanted to coach another game. I told them in the locker room that as much as I've coached in a WNBA five-game semifinal series, and this is certainly the furthest that we've gone since I've been at Baylor. And so I told them I'll be better. Like, I will be better because we'll start to get used to -- there was no doubt -- I'm not afraid to say I was really, really offended by the article that came out. And I didn't read any of it. I didn't read any of it.

Don't know what happened. Didn't read the article. But nothing's withering in Waco. Nothing is withering in Waco. And we're going to do it our way. And it's going to be just as good.

But nothing is withering, and we are not a first-tier team, and you can't say we are. You can't get to the Sweet 16 and take a number one seed down to the wire in a one-possession game and say anything's withering in Waco. So I think that the end of seasons are about honoring seniors and not spending a lot of time talking about next year.

I really do because I think that was three players' potentially last game, and that's who this is about. But I'm excited to have this backcourt back. And there's a lot blooming. I'm going to say not withering. There's some stuff blooming in Waco. So if he wants to come to Waco and write an article about it next year, he's welcome.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your time.

NICKI COLLEN: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations on a good season.

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