

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Final - UConn vs USC

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Moda Center

USC Trojans

Head Coach Lindsay

Gottlieb

Kayla Williams

Kaitlyn Davis

Kayla Padilla

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference



doesn't feel like there's a lot of pressure.

I think we've been able to combine that joy and joy for the game and gratitude for still be playing with an urgency and a toughness that you need to win in March, and I think the reason I feel confident is we've seen that now for about a month.

You know, we've grown over the whole year, but really we've seen that combination of those two things. So the fact that we haven't played in this game before I think is okay. We have a lot of experiences to call upon, particularly from the PAC-12, which has felt like NCAA Tournament games for the last two months.

And then just the lead-up to this and who we've become as a team, I think, gives us confidence.

Q. Lindsay, happy Easter. Is there a significance to you to this being the first Elite Eight that this program has been in since Cheryl Miller in, I think, 30 years and over the same timeframe, you are now playing a program that has been at the forefront of women's college basketball for the last 30 years? Is there a significance to you that this is the team that you're playing in this Elite Eight game?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the awareness and significance of USC's history and the incredible women that we stand on their shoulders has been part of our story this year. We are really cognizant of what the USC women's basketball program has meant to the history of women's basketball and then to us as a team.

I think that is significant, and it has been the whole season. Not necessarily more in this game than any other game, but Kenzie said it best when we won the PAC-12 Championship. We stand on the shoulders of the giants, and those really have really poured into us.

In terms of playing UConn, I don't think so. I mean, I think to UConn's credit, they have evolved and become a very unique team this season, and that's who we're playing against.

THE MODERATOR: First up on the dais is USC and Head Coach Lindsay Gottlieb. Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement and open it up for questions.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you all. Good morning. Happy Easter to those who celebrate. Good day to be still playing basketball. In case you're wondering, the Easter bunny did make his way to the Marriott, so my children were happy this morning. Thank you to my family and the staff for making that happen for our children this morning. That was cool.

Huge task in front of us. Obviously, UConn is an incredible program and, more importantly, this year is playing as well as anybody, but we're excited to be here. We still have that joy and gratitude to be playing in the Elite Eight, and we have a task in front of us that we'll really prep today and get ready to go for hopefully a great game tomorrow night.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. I asked Rayah a similar question post-game yesterday. When you bring a team who's never been here before, do you learn about them along the way, or are you fairly confident in your preparations and their readiness for this moment?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Definitely thoroughly confident for their readiness at this moment, and part of that is because we haven't been here, and we're creating our own story. It



I don't think we're playing against the history of that program. So I think the history of our program pours into us, but the game is the game with two good teams facing off.

Q. Coach, you took McKenzie Forbes to the NCAA Tournament her freshmen year at Cal, went your separate ways. How cool is it to kind of be in this moment with McKenzie heading into the Elite Eight at a different school than one you were initially at?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Really cool. I mean, it's really cool, to answer your question. I mean, I just believe that at its core women's college basketball is so much about relationships.

Things aren't always linear. It's really hard to leave a job and leave a place. You know, when I left Cal for the NBA, that was not an easy decision. And the most important things to me were having those young people that I had to leave understand why I made that decision, and hoping that it's in some way inspired them to do whatever might be challenge willing for them in the future.

And really kind of in realtime, then Kenzie left and went to Harvard. That wasn't easy. She wasn't guaranteed to get in. No one would have predicted I would come back to women's basketball, least of all me. And then the whole COVID thing and COVID year. It all just kind of worked out.

But I think the cool part about it is just the story of human connection. And then to see her play so well and be such a big factor in this team's success and the fun that we're having, it's just -- she's an incredible young person. Her family's great. So just enjoying it for her, as I am for the rest of our players on our team, too.

Q. I heard you might have had a little bit of a back story or some deep connections with Geno and UConn, maybe on a recruiting trip or a camp to something?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Let's clarify. I definitely was not recruited by UConn. But the story is my best friend from literally preschool on but all the way through high school, a woman named Hillary Howard at this time now Heieck, she actually was here for -- flew up to Portland with her daughter to watch this. But she was an incredible high school basketball player, and I was her nerdy best friend who loved basketball.

And Geno, I'm sure he would tell you, recruited her as hard as he recruited anyone. In his book he talks about that's the first big recruit that he lost, and he lost her to Duke.

She and I have had no fights in our life except when she said you want to go to UConn, and she said, You wanted me to go to UConn, and I couldn't say no necessarily because Geno welcomed all of us into what they were doing.

So I wasn't recruited by UConn, but I felt I had a front-row seat to that explosion of women's college basketball. It was the Rizzotti, Lobo team, Cara Wolters. We would go up and watch practice. We would watch games. And so for me, that was a cool thing to see.

She goes to Duke. And this is so crazy because I feel so old. Me and Hillary one of our other friends went to work the UConn camp that summer. Think about that now. If a recruit went elsewhere and then came to work your camp, like, that wouldn't go over that well these days with the transfer portal. But he was really, really generous to me with his time, with his insights.

There were times at which he was recruiting her so hard, he would call me. We spoke on the phone a couple times. I was at her house. Then when I got into coaching, it was, How can I help? What do you need?

I've always remembered that. So, yeah. There's that connection there.

Q. The only two PAC-12 teams left in the tournament are the ones that were picked 6th and 10th. I wondered, do you think that that, you know, being dismissed by everyone is part of why you're here, or why is it that you two are still dancing?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Well, first, shout-out to the Beavers and Coach Rueck. They've done an incredible job. Scott's an amazing coach. Obviously, they have a tall task today against South Carolina, but I wouldn't put anything past that team. You know, I would say maybe less than being dismissed, I think the PAC-12 conference was so loaded with talent.

And I think people tend to go with what they've seen before, right? And there was a history with all the people picked in front of us where people thought they had more returning talent or what have you.

Oregon State didn't sneak up on us. They had everyone returning. So I sure didn't vote for them 10th, but I think uniquely each team takes on a story. For us we have used that underdog thing that nobody picked us.

We have to prove things to people. And I think Oregon State has used their togetherness and everyone stayed,

and they went through a lot of hard losses last year, and they've turned it around. So I do think every team takes on a narrative and a story. There is something a little extra special I think about both of our teams feeling like, you know, we had something to prove.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you specifically about Kaitlyn Davis. She might not score a single point, but just her setting screens out there, her positioning over the basket, rebounding-wise, challenging shots at the rim. Obviously, UConn has a talented front court with Aaliyah Edwards there. Just what kind of impact has she had for you this year, and what are you going to need out of her going into tomorrow's game?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's had an incredible impact. I mean, way beyond the numbers. Like, winning plays, winning mentality, toughness. I tell people her game against UCLA in the semifinal in the PAC-12 Tournament was one of the most incredible displays of winning basketball that I've seen.

And continually through many games. Multiple efforts, guards a lot of different people, grit, toughness can make the assist. I mean, she's had a couple of those assists on the game-winning threes that we've had or down the stretch.

So she's invaluable to us. She can guard multiple positions. Since they came back, she had an injury early in the season and then followed that up with a concussion and was kind of out of rhythm. Since these caught her rhythm, it gives us a lot of versatility. We feel like between Rayah, Clarice, and KD we have a three-headed monster in the post, but then KD can also guard on the perimeter. So we really need her. We need her in and our success is directly linked to her being on our team.

THE MODERATOR: We've got a lot of people wanting to ask questions. I'm doing my best to get around to as many I can.

Q. Lindsay, if performance unit program came to the women's side in the near future, I'm just curious if you think that would maybe lead to an increased investment in the sport maybe across the country? I know maybe that's not a huge thing --

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Say it again. Performance units like on the men's side.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Oh, yes, yes.

Q. I mumble, sorry. Do you think that could lead to an increased investment across the country in the

program if maybe programs saw more of a financial ROI?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Absolutely. Give us the units. Why shouldn't we have the units, right? The direct investment. People like money. They like return on investment. I think people are starting to see that women's basketball is not just a values proposition, although it's great theater and it's great entertainment, but there's also a monetary aspect to it.

And absolutely, I just don't see any reason why, if there's men's basketball that gets units for the tournament, why we shouldn't. So definitely a proponent of that.

Q. When you look at the games tomorrow, obviously, Paige and Juju here, you go across the country. Iowa, LSU, so much star power. Caitlin, Angel. What does it mean to women's basketball at large?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I saw somewhere today someone tweeted or something, RIP to the viewership numbers, right? It's going to crush everything. I think we would all tell you, right, it's USC against UConn, and it's LSU against Iowa. But star power drives narratives in athletics. It's why the NBA took off, you know, when there were faces to it, going all the way back to Magic and Larry and Michael Jordan.

I think it's great for our game. The quality of basketball has been really high and really exciting, but to have stars in these games, I think, makes people tune in. And when you tune in for Juju, you see Kaitlyn Davis and Kayla Padilla, Rayah, and Kenzie Williams, which is cool, and I think you'd say the same for the other three teams as well.

So I think it's great for our game, and it will be a good day of women's college basketball tomorrow.

Q. Good morning, Lindsay. I was wondering, you were talking about playing with joy. Watching Juju, she seems like she just has that joy that she plays with. Have you ever, since she's been here, sensed her pressing, or like yesterday, she went through a little rough spot, mini-slump. Do you ever sense her pressing, or is she always just so joyful to watch?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I would say that she's always focused on the right things, on winning, on fixing something that's going wrong, on continually something that's going right. And I think with all that she handles, it's unbelievable that we haven't seen her press more.

There's been times where I've watched film with her after a game and said, Hey, what do you see here, or what did



this feel like here? I think she's evolved in terms of understanding what's coming at her and how to make those reads.

But I don't know that pressing is the right word, so I think that's really a credit to her demeanor.

Certainly she's had games where there's a two- or three-minute stretch where she's not getting exactly what she wants out of it, but her ability to learn and adjust in realtime is phenomenal. So I think you see her trying to focus on the next right thing to do, and it's really impressive to see from an 18-year-old.

Q. You were in this spot, what, 11 years ago, once before? That was pretty early in your coaching career. What did you take away from that experience up in Spokane when you had Cal in this position?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: One other Geno story on that. I remember when we're at the Final Four and they did some kind of salute dinner. You get sized for rings. I was right next to him. He made some comment along the lines of, Lindsay can really enjoy this. When she's at her 10th, which is really nice of him, it will feel like a relief like it feels for me. That was an interesting kind of comment, of course. Shows how hard it is to get back.

So I remember at the time making the Final Four was incredibly joyous. We had a meeting before. Once you won the Sweet 16 game, they put the coaches in the administrative meetings, which they don't do anymore. We talked about how they put the stage on and the roping. And that first time in the meeting headed into the Elite Eight game, I was, like, wow, I feel a ton of pressure because I want our players to experience this.

You get to this point, and you want them to experience what's potentially next. I would say all these years later I'm just able to do what we do with this team, put us in the best possible situation that I can to win, and then you let the players transcend your game plan and go out there and do it.

I think our players have given me the confidence to sleep at night knowing UConn's an incredible team and we're going to put together the best game plan, be the best version of us and we let it go.

But for me having them be even-keeled and playing joyous and playing as we've been playing is the best thing I can do for them. And to be honest that's really how I feel. That's what we need to do to give ourselves the best shot to win, if that makes sense and answers your question.

THE MODERATOR: And unfortunately we are out of time. Coach, thank you very much.

Joining us now are student-athletes from USC, Kayla Williams, Kayla Padilla and Kaitlyn Davis.

Q. Congratulations, ladies. Kaitlyn, you are a Connecticut kid. Feels kind of weird for you to be playing with the Huskies. What are your thoughts?

KAITLYN DAVIS: Yeah, I think it's weird playing in this game, but it's also a dream come true. Growing up in Connecticut, you dream of being on the same court as them and as Geno. So I think this is a great opportunity.

Even my family back tomorrow, they're huge Huskies fans, but they're like, You've got to get them on Monday. So, yeah.

Q. For either Kayla, I guess, you guys have talked a lot about how you've had to change your roles from the teams you were on last year in terms of building for what this has been. How has that process of sacrifice gone, and what does it feel like to see it all sort of pan out?

KAYLA WILLIAMS: Yeah. Obviously, it's been different, but I think you sacrifice a lot of things for moments like this. We've been able to overcome a lot of things, adversities throughout the journey of this season.

Like I said, getting moments like these, getting to experience stuff like this is -- it makes it all worth it. So, obviously, it hasn't been the easiest. But we've been able to get here, and we stick by each other. So having each other has allowed us and me personally just to make it this far.

KAYLA PADILLA: And I'll just echo that. When I came here, I knew that my role was going to be different, but I just was willing to do anything to get to moments like this, like Kayla Williams said. When you're looking forward to an Elite Eight, it's hard to think of that as a sacrifice and more just like, I don't know, just your responsibility to do what you can to contribute to get your team this far.

Q. For any of you to answer or multiple of you to answer. Coach always talks about just, like, the way that she thinks you guys play with joy and stay present and that even though you all haven't been on this stage before, it's not something that's weighing down on you. Where do you think that comes from? And how have you seen that really just develop as this team has been able to play longer and longer throughout the season?

KAYLA PADILLA: I got it. Yeah, I just feel like this whole season we felt like we've had something to prove. And even coming into this tournament as a 1 seed, I feel like we've still felt like the underdog. And I feel like that allows us to strike this balance of having a lot of confidence of being one of the top teams in this tournament, but also, again, having the underdog mentality of still proving to the world that, like, we are a top-tier team and that we can be successful on this stage.

And this team, we have a lot of diverse experience. Like, speaking from the Ivies, this is the first time me and Katie are at this tournament. Individually we have experiences that really want to have us embrace this moment and cherish it for what it is.

Q. Kaitlyn, when Lindsay was telling us the other day when she was recruiting the Ivy League transfers, it maybe helps she speaks Ivy, too. What's that sound like for those of us that don't get to go to those schools? And I guess generally, what was the recruiting process like, and why did you pick USC?

KAITLYN DAVIS: That's for me to answer? I think she speaks more Ivy than I do, but honestly, the other part -- but for recruiting-wise, I think she kind of hit my coach, I think, because she played at Brown, and then I had known that she played there.

Then we just went from there. I came and visited. Everybody was great. It was just a typical easy recruiting process. Everything seemed to fit. And, obviously, it worked out well enough, so... Made a good decision, I think.

Q. For any of you guys, has it really sunk in that you're playing in the Elite Eight tomorrow? And if it has, just how excited are you for that moment?

KAYLA WILLIAMS: Well, obviously, this is my first time making it this far and playing in the Elite Eight, so it kind of hasn't sunk in yet, but being here is just an amazing experience.

Obviously, we have dreams. We have hopes of making it this far. So to be here is amazing, but the job is not done. Obviously, we're not going to take it for granted. We put in the work, and we got here because of the work we put in.

Just being able to experience it, take it all in, and then, obviously, take it one game at a time and continue to move forward.

KAYLA PADILLA: I'll just add that like Kayla Williams, it

feel it hasn't really sunk in yet. I feel like this season has been a natural progression of expecting us to continue to do better and better. So I think we always rise to the occasion and take every game, obviously, very seriously and take it one game at a time.

But, I don't know, with the way things have been going for us, it feels like we should be elevating to newer heights every single time.

Q. For either of you, you guys have had a lot of close wins this season, a lot of single digits. Yesterday was no different. How do you just stay poised in that moment, especially in the tournament when the season is on the line and teams are trying to keep -- are playing on a different level?

KAYLA WILLIAMS: I think when it comes down to it, it's sticking together. In that moment, we're going to face adversity, and things get hard down the stretch. Honing in on the game plan, the scout, and staying together, being together, playing together with one another and for one another in those moments because they can get hard. They can get tough.

We know, like I said, we've been in a lot of tough situations down the stretch that have prepared us and got us ready for these moments, so just literally doing what we know we can and playing USC basketball.

Q. Kaitlyn, when you step on the court, it feels like you're everywhere on both ends of the court, blocking shots, creating opportunities. When you're talking with Coach Lindsay, what are goals you're setting heading into each game, being a starter?

KAITLYN DAVIS: Everybody always talks to me before the game, and they're, like, "I need 20 rebounds, 10 rebounds, 15 rebounds." For me, I'm just trying to do the best I can to hustle because I think, really, that's my job and my role that I feel like that I've stepped into is doing the little things that don't necessarily show up. So for me, it's just putting my best foot forward, especially on every play. But, yeah. My mentality usually is just to go get it. You know what I mean? I don't know if that makes sense, but, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for our student-athletes?

Q. For any of you, it seems like every time Rayah Marshall comes out here, she does something that cracks everybody up. What is it about her personality that just works for your team, and how has that been helpful over the course of the season?

KAYLA WILLIAMS: I mean, I just feel like she's not afraid to be who she is. Whether that's, like, in front of any group. And she brings a different personality to this team that, honestly, like, it's funny. It can be funny one moment. Honestly, it just cracks us up all the time.

Just her fearlessness of being who she is, you know, owning that. It's funny. And it allows us to, obviously, build relationships and connect off the court as well, so...

KAYLA PADILLA: Rayah started singing Christmas songs at breakfast today. I think that just goes to show her personality (laughter).

Q. For the Kaylas, have you heard from Noelle Quinn at all during this run? And Kayla Padilla, what does it mean to wear her number?

KAYLA PADILLA: Yeah, she actually texted us yesterday. And I maybe took it a little too far with what I said, with her alma mater experience yesterday. But, no, she's been super supportive of us. I know she roots for us except for maybe when we're not playing UCLA.

But it's been a dream come true, I think, for both of us to have played together in high school to now be on the biggest stage of college basketball. It's been awesome to share this experience with Kayla as well.

To wear her number, I mean, it was a no-brainer coming into this college experience. She represents who I want to be as a basketball player and as a person. And I think there's no better way to honor her throughout this whole experience and what she's been able to do for me as a mentor and a friend.

KAYLA WILLIAMS: Yeah, just to piggyback on what Kayla said. Yeah, her support has been huge. She did reach out to us. It was a little -- a fun, little conversation back and forth. But just knowing that, obviously, she's not here physically, but knowing that she's supporting from afar has been huge up and to this point, and I appreciate it for real because the bonds like that will never -- they'll go on forever, so it's huge.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? All right. Kayla, Kaitlyn and Kayla, thank you for your time. We wish you luck tomorrow.

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