

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

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

McKenzie Forbes

JuJu Watkins

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UConn 80, USC 73

THE MODERATOR: We are join by USC.

Coach, congratulations on a hard-fought game and on a good season. We'll begin with your opening statement.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you.

I really want to credit UConn. I mean, they earned their way to a Final Four. I don't think we gave it to them. I think they earned it.

Sometimes to have the perspective and think about what another team has been through I think is really important, with the injuries they've had, with the way that Coach Geno adjusted throughout the course of the year, I just credit them a ton.

I don't know Paige personally, but to see that kid be out for two years and come back and do this, as much hurt as we're in, they earned it, and I credit them. They're just such a class program.

I told the team in there, what we did this year was incredibly unique and something I won't ever forget. I do think it's important. Like you guys are on the outside looking in, and all of a sudden USC explodes on the scene, and it's not lost on me how hard that is.

I haven't cried yet, but I might now. Just with all the things that have been said about JuJu, I need to say this. This kid committed to us when we were 12-16. Once in a while the belief in me and all that, once in a while her mom would



say are we recruiting this kid, are we recruiting that kid, all the people she would go to USA Basketball and say I can't get them to call me back, but we're going to keep trying, that's where we were. Now look where we are, right?

So her ability to do that and make that leap and perform how she has goes so far beyond the tag words that we use. In addition to that, my conversations this year with her, never once about anything personality-wise, behavior: You got to treat this person this way, you have to learn this. She came in with it.

She's beloved by her teammates, she's a winner. We talk about how are you doing in basketball, how are you doing in life?

I think that's really important to say. None of it would have worked without the rest of the team either. I have returning players who handled the whole thing great. I have McKenzie Forbes and her teammates who came in here and said, Let's do this together. I am so proud and grateful for what this team did.

We are disappointed. We had our sights on Cleveland. I think we've done a lot of celebrating. I appreciate that. I think this team's legacy is forever entrenched in USC history and I hope women's basketball because it's unique what we did, and I'm very proud of that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. JuJu, I know it hurts right now, but that was a pretty incredible game. There were some really amazing moments. As someone who loves basketball, do you think you can appreciate what a moment that was tonight for the game?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I mean, it's definitely great for the game. Just these matchups I think will go down in history, just the tenacity that was out there on the floor tonight in both games.

I was trying to catch glimpses of the other game when I'm getting ready. But it was just a great, great time. It's a



great time in women's basketball. Very exciting. I'm just glad I'm able to be a part of it.

Q. JuJu, obviously hard to put it into perspective right now. Looking back on you coming into this program, recruitment, saying you didn't expect to be here, has this year fulfilled everything that you wanted when you were coming into USC?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I think everything and more. Of course, we fell short in the end. But like Lindsay said, it's been a great ride. I have the best teammates in the world. Just glad that (tearing up)...

Next question.

Q. McKenzie, can you speak to what you thought the difference was in the game.

McKENZIE FORBES: I don't know exactly. Obviously look at the film. They're a really good team. You can tell when you're out there playing them, they know exactly what they want to get to. If you guard any single action the wrong way, if you try to take a shortcut, they capitalize on it.

I think they just capitalized off every one of our mistakes. I thought we battled till the end. But I think they were just the better team today.

Q. McKenzie, your last hurrah as a graduate. How does it feel to be on such an historic team?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, like Ju said, it's an amazing group. I'm just really grateful to end my career with Coach G, to be able to kind of rewrite, like, the history of what USC women's basketball is and can be in the future.

Yeah, just grateful.

Q. JuJu, what did you think going against Nika? What made her such an effective defender today?

JUJU WATKINS: I would just say the team played great defense. I think every time I got past the first line, somebody was there. I had to try to find my teammates. So that was pretty much it.

Q. McKenzie, is it for sure, are you done? Technically could push for another year.

McKENZIE FORBES: I'm done.

Q. McKenzie, you obviously took the Paige matchup tonight. What was your mentality going into that? How fun was it to play this and go back and forth with

her?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, she's a great player. I think going into it, I was just really focused on, like I said, guarding every action the right way in terms of, like, if I'm going over, to go over. When she gets rid of the ball, get into her body and make her go the way we want her to go.

I did the best that I could. Like I said earlier, anytime that you have a short mental lapse, she capitalized on it. She's very good at making reads. She made tough ones. I thought we did the best that we could as a team.

Yeah, a great player. I have a lot of respect for her.

Q. JuJu, it's shortly after the game, but is there anything you can take away from this game and learn and apply that to your future career at USC?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, I think just coming up short, that adds a lot of fuel to the fire for the next couple years. I'm just excited to go back home and get in the gym now. I'm really focused on learning from this season as a whole, things I can improve on. Definitely my efficiency and stuff like that.

But I'm just grateful for this year because I've learned a lot.

Q. McKenzie, what excites you the most about the future that USC has with JuJu leading the way?

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, I mean, I told her on the way here, These people got to deal with you for three more years. If I was a coach, would be my worst nightmare.

Just really excited to see her grow. As incredible as she is, it's scary because she still can get so much better.

But I think more than how good she is, like, Coach G kind of alluded to, it's really rare that you get a superstar that can come in. She's selfless. She's mature. She's a winner. She only cares about winning. She's (expletive) 18 years old. Sorry. Excuse my language.

Seriously, I would want to be her teammate every day of the week. I truly mean that. I think this program couldn't be in better hands than with her (tearing up).

Yeah, I'm just grateful that I got to be a small part of her journey. I think SC women's basketball is in great hands.

Q. JuJu, you did set the single-season freshman scoring record. What does that mean?

JUJU WATKINS: It's definitely an honor. I mean, of



course, like I said, not really the terms I would like to end on, on my season, I mean, I'm just blessed. This program has offered me a lot. I'm so grateful for it. It's just been a great season.

The record is great. Just the moments that I've got to spend with this team have meant everything to me. I'm just excited for next year, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: McKenzie, JuJu, thank you.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Gottlieb.

Q. You've coached a lot of great players. What separates Paige? What makes her different?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, she's really tough to guard in a lot of ways 'cause of the movement. They do a phenomenal job. He has for so long with all these great players that he's had. It's not easy to game plan because they're on the move a lot. I think that's a critical piece of it.

I think she's got everything in the arsenal. Obviously she can shoot it, pass it. She's very fluid in transition. She's just a tough cover in a lot of ways.

It sounds crazy to say with her numbers, there were times I thought we really guarded the actions well. She made some tough shots. I think they got us in transition off of some of our turnovers.

A player like that, you can't let her get anything easy because she's even going to make the tough ones at times. I think that's where we faltered a little bit.

She's just a tough shot-maker and a great all-around player.

Q. Emotional time for the team, but as the head coach, how do you transition the mindset from it's not the result we wanted to we're back to square one, focus on next season?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I don't think emotion is a bad thing, right? You cry or you have emotion because you care, because you really wanted something. We came up short tonight.

I told them in there. I've coached for a long time. We did a lot more celebrating than some teams get to do. Certainly the confetti at the Pac-12 tournament was huge. We're on the up-rise, right? So we celebrated the win at Stanford. We celebrate a win at home against Colorado or whatever happened, the UCLA win at home.

We've had a lot of moments like that. I think I really want them to feel the emotion. We've had a lot more joy than sadness. This one really hurts.

The way that college athletics is now, we have a lot of seniors, the seniors go, a new group comes in, we reset and say, what are our goals?

Obviously now this is going to be the standard. I hope we're able to enjoy the moments because we're going to be so young next year that we're going to be in a different stratosphere where this is the standard. That's going to drive us, and I know we'll respond accordingly.

Q. You've referred to the Ivy League transfers as the nerds all year. What is the lasting effect they've had on this program?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I would say all of our seniors, I know they get the most attention, they have made it an absolute joy to come to work every day. We're with this group, like, 24/7, quite honestly. To have such incredible people. I mean, they were selfless. They're hoopers. They're big-time players. They're competitors. I think everyone in that locker room who had an opportunity to play with them will be better for it. I think that's their lasting impact.

I'm so grateful that I had the opportunity to coach them for this year. I know we'll be connected forever after.

Q. What was the decision-making behind having McKenzie take on the Paige matchup for most of the night, especially when Paige got going? Any thought of putting JuJu on her?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, we were supposed to be switching a little bit more than we did. At this point of the season, this type of game, to do a ton of stuff different than what your go-to defensive schemes are. We also haven't played a lot of players like Paige.

The idea was any time she was coming off we were supposed to switch. There were times the coverage didn't go exactly as we had wanted. Obviously in transition things were different. But we started switching all ball screens at the end, trying to get different bodies on her.

Yeah, I'm sure I'll watch the film and say, Here, there, the next place we could have done something different. The idea was we were supposed to have a lot of different bodies on her.

Q. You've talked about how well your team has stepped up to new situations. Did it feel like you guys

were a little rushed today, or was that UConn bringing it?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, to me, in it, I felt like it was the game, right? The actual technical aspects of what were going on. They cut so hard, they play so hard, you have to be at that pace.

In watching it, I think we didn't shoot it as well as we normally shoot it. I give UConn a lot of credit for that. We haven't been on this stage. Coach B actually said in the locker room, to be a champion, you have to beat a champion. We had to beat Stanford in the Pac-12 tournament, who is a longtime champion. That's kind of ingrained.

Obviously here UConn is a championship team. I know they haven't won it the last couple years. Maybe there's some learning of what we have to do there of what it takes.

For the most part I felt like this was a really good basketball game. They beat us. Like, they did a little bit better of what they do than what we do.

I actually thought, when you look at the stat lines, the star players, the stats are relatively similar. They got production from some places that's going to keep me up at night that wasn't Aaliyah and Paige. We just didn't get enough. We didn't get enough stops. They went on the early run in the third, we had to fight back. We weren't playing from ahead very long after that first quarter.

Q. JuJu's first lost of the season, how she was up there crying with you guys. I'm sure this loss hurts for her, too. How do you think she'll respond from this? How do you think this could drive her?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I've only ever seen her respond to anything adverse in incredibly positive ways. She works harder than anyone I know. Her mind is always in the right place. She's going to have to take on some different things, right? Now it's team, leadership, things that aren't basketball related. I'm excited for her to really walk into everything that's coming for her. There's no question in my mind, you give her something adverse, she's going to use that just to get better.

As Kenzie said, that's a little scary for everyone else.

Q. You're losing a couple seniors, couple graduates, but you're bringing in a lot of highly rated players. How excited are you about the trajectory of this program?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, I think that's one of

the things I said to them. They have completely changed a narrative about a program. That's, like, really powerful. The way that the country's going to see USC women's basketball is really different than it was four months ago. That's a powerful thing for the group here.

I think their legacy is that they got us somewhere. Now it's on all of us to say, What's next? We're not trying to be a one-hit wonder. There's a ton of investment from the people above me, our administration. But now the community is really engaged. I think the sky's the limit for where we can go even though it will look different.

I have seven freshmen coming in. There goes my summer (smiling). Coach B says all the time to everyone involved, We had the Ivys last summer, we all got to go back to work this summer with a bunch of young kids coming in.

We're super excited about the trajectory of the program. We have to keep working. No one is going to hand anything to us. In fact, there will be more of a target on our back. But we're really excited about where we're going from here.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thank you.

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