

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Ole Miss vs UCLA

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Coach, an opening statement?

CORI CLOSE: Thank you guys for being here. This is going to be a great regional. And thank you to the city of Spokane and all the work that goes into making an event like this really spectacular and elite. So we're excited to be a part, and I just appreciate all the people that have poured so much into it.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take questions.

Q. We've had the NCAA tournament here before, men's and women's, but I don't think we've ever had a field with this much talent and this deep. For you as a fan of the game, as a coach, as a competitor, even on the other side of the bracket, when you look around and you see the players and the names, what comes to mind when you see how much talent is here?

CORI CLOSE: Well, just what a time it is to be involved in women's sports right now and specifically obviously women's basketball. I just think as someone that's been doing this 32 years, sometimes I just have to pinch myself about how far we've come and to be able to look around and see the skill level up, the exposure up, the corporate sponsorship up, the attendance up, like, we've been scratching and clawing for that kind of growth for a really long time.

And credit to these women and this current field for how they have earned that and thank you to all the people who have come before us to blaze that kind of trail. But it is truly a special time to be involved in women's basketball, and I just think we're scratching the surface. The best is



still yet to come.

Q. Have you seen teams try to do different things this year gimmick defenses, whatever, to try to stop or slow down Lauren Betts?

CORI CLOSE: You know, I think that -- I wouldn't say as many gimmicks. She's a tough one to, like -- it's a nontraditional situation to be in. You don't box and one the center same way as you do maybe some guards. But we definitely have seen zones and doubling with your off guard. We have seen just sandwiched up even before she ever touches it, trying to just limit touches.

But it's really a matter of how many people they're sending to her and what that looks like. But we have seen about every kind of rotation, is it coming from the back side, from the strong side, but it's never -- hardly ever one-on-one. I think there's been maybe -- maybe two teams all year that have said, Hey, we're just going to take our chances and go one-on-one and if we give up twos, fine, but we're not going to give up inside-out threes.

Q. To follow-up, is it your philosophy that Lauren's got to touch the ball every possession?

CORI CLOSE: I don't know about every possession, but we can't lose track of her. I think that sometimes if she doesn't touch the ball, maybe we're creating something else because we're reading the situation really well. So as we come down -- one of the big things I get really frustrated with her -- with our team is if we miss her in transition. If we get great steps and we are unaware that that's probably our best chance to get a one-on-one opportunity, that frustrates me. I think we should try to get her a touch every single time in transition off a missed basket stop that we've gotten at the other end.

But I think the great luxury of having Lauren is that she also creates really good opportunities for our other players. So I would much rather them read that scenario. We always say no robots allowed. We want to have them be basketball players that are reading situations and making plays out of that. And Lauren gives you a great opportunity to put teams in rotation every single time down the court.

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Its just a matter of reading how those are coming and how we capitalize that for somebody else.

Q. Two questions for you. To start off, the Bruins haven't made the Elite 8 since 2018, and I know that you guys have bigger aspirations than that, but how big would that be to cross that hurdle again and what about this specific group that you have makes that something that you feel is achievable?

CORI CLOSE: Well, obviously you want to make those next steps. We have a competitive staff and team, and they want to -- like you said, we have bigger aspirations, and we know where we've been and where we want to go. But honestly, I want them to focus on the preparation. I've told our team this story many times, and it's sort of one that gets passed down. But I remember Alana Beard came and spoke to our team -- this was a long time ago, but she told the story of being in a Game 5 in the WNBA Championship at Minnesota, sold-out crowd, and she asked herself two questions; have I done everything under my control to master my craft and have I been an elite teammate.

And she told herself she could answer that question yes to both, and so she told herself, surrender the outcomes and play in freedom. And I want our players to have complete focus on mastering their craft and being elite teammates with and for each other, and then that gives them the best chance to go back to an Elite 8, go beyond to a Final Four, to compete for a National Championship.

I think when you focus on what will that mean to the program and is that going to be pressure from me, I actually think that takes away from the freedom to maximize your performance in the present moment. So would it mean a lot? Absolutely. Are our eyes focused on the standards of what it will take to get there? Yes. But I really just want us to stay present on being 1-0.

Q. You're such a voice for women's basketball and how much the sport has grown as you've been saying. JuJu, who was in this -- in regional in Spokane, just how disappointing is that for her as a young player, but then also, she is a face of this sport and just how much of a hit does that take for women's college basketball?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I really hope that she's -- she's been wonderful and sort of taking the mantle and really being the face of women's basketball. She's really continued to be a reason why we're continuing to push the sport forward. I know she's brought out better things in our program, and so really thankful for the elite talent that she is and what we have been sort of able to do in Southern California together.

That being said, two things: One, she will come back better and stronger. I can't wait to hear how this affects her story moving forward. And she will be -- you know, who knows how it will manifest, but I don't have any doubt she will look back on this and go, You know what? In the long-term, it actually made me a better basketball player and I grew a ton as a young woman. She's such a fighter. She will be ready.

That being said, I feel like it's time for people around the country to really step up and see some of the other amazing players who are ready to shine. I am so sad that JuJu is not playing in the tournament anymore, but I am excited for other players that are going to step into that spotlight. And it's not even about my players. It's about the sport in general. Like, I mean, goodness gracious, I mean, I'm having to scout all these players and the guards from NC State and obviously great players from LSU. I mean, those are just the ones on my path. But that's like selling it short. There are so many elite players in our game, and I can't wait to see some new faces shine.

Q. I know you mentioned the Alana Beard story, but being the No. 1 overall seed, having that target on your back and that pressure that comes with it, how do you keep your team mellow-headed and not let it get the best of you?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, mellow-headed, I like that.

You know, I think the reality for me is usually when -- you know, when things like this that feel like pressure, first of all, is a privilege. Like, how many people would love to be in our shoes. Coach Tasha leads our mind gym or our mental conditioning, and she said something yesterday when she was taking the team through some mind gym exercises, that you're going to be great because your preparation is always going to be greater than the moment.

So I just want us to stay focused on that, but when I can sense that they're, like, putting that pressure on themselves because they are a bunch of achievers, this is the hardest-working group I've ever had a chance to be around as a collective whole, and I think the two things I really try to focus on are gratitude and joy. I think when you are just focused on, man, you have worked, look what you've earned, how great is this moment, what an opportunity, and just filling the room with gratitude and joy and lightness, and let's -- as long as we're doing our job with our preparation, I just think the more we can laugh, the more we can understand how fortunate we are, I think we free ourselves up for the bigger, biggest moments. They understand the assignment.

Q. Angela, she's kind of been an unsung leader for this team. How has the growth of her leadership impressed you this season?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, that's the thing about our team. Someone asked me the other day about, What's been most fun for you to watch this team? And I think it's celebrating all the unsung heroes, the people that have made really selfless choices for the betterment of the whole. And I think Angela is one of those. Angela is one of the most skilled 4 players and swing players in the entire country, and she has just been so willing to be like, Hey, what does the team need from me?

Her ability to shoot the three, to space the floor on the high/low game with Lauren, her ability to switch out. You know, one of the things that I remember seeing in her in the first Olympics that she played in, the way they used her to switch out on guards and her ability to sit down in a stance and keep people in front. That gives us such a luxury in terms of what we're able to do defensively and how we rotate.

But more than anything else, you have to make a mental and emotional choice to choose team first. I think we've been the quietest No. 1 team in the country that anyone's -- nobody's talking about us. I mean, I know we've gotten plenty, but I sort of relish that. Like, we have just this selfless team that just cares about winning and cares about making each other better, and Angela has been a really key factor in that.

Q. You mentioned this earlier in the week, that you love watching the way Ole Miss plays defense. Could you elaborate on what is it specifically that they do?

CORI CLOSE: Well credit to Coach Yo on this. She has just built an identity around this tough-minded -- what do her T-shirts say? Disrupt or -- something and disrupt. But they just find their identity in being a really tough-minded defensive team, and that they're going to do it that defensive gritty way. And I don't think that's easy to do in this day and age as a leader.

So first of all, kudos to her as the head coach that's built that as the foundation of their program. But just watching on film, I just -- that's been our total focus, is that what are we going to do to be able to attack to our strengths versus that tough-minded defense. Obviously, we've been paying attention to their team just because we're still Christeen Iwuala fans. So we've probably watched more games throughout the year, just celebrating her next part of her journey.

So feel like I did have a better sense going into this game

than maybe I would have otherwise. But they know who they are, and they know how they're built. So I think other than rebounding, I would say our ability to take care of the ball and get paint shots against that tough-minded defense are really the keys to the game.

Q. Obviously Kiki is such a talented player, and we have seen a lot of her leadership in the way that she called that players-only meeting after the loss to USC and things like that, but what does she do behind the scenes that really makes her special in your eyes?

CORI CLOSE: It all starts with her work ethic. It starts that she has built a culture of work in our program that has been absolutely contagious. I've had multiple WNBA coaches come through and go, The way that they work before and after practice with such consistency and across the board is -- that doesn't happen very many places, and that credit goes directly to Kiki.

I think the second thing that's been so fun to watch in her growth is she's always been a performance leader and a leader by example, but Coach Shannon has done an incredible job in our Leaders in Training Program, our LIT Program, helping her find what does her influence and voice look like, and it can be unique to her. So helping her find what is, what does it look like for Kiki Rice to be the most impactful and influential leader. She's going on a journey, but she's making sure she's bringing people with her, and that's been really fun to watch her find her voice and influence, and really I give Coach Shannon a lot of credit for that.

Q. Speaking of injuries, Charlis Leger-Walker has been in your program for a while now. How is she handling her situation and what are you hoping to see from her down the road?

CORI CLOSE: Well, let me just tell you that we have a potential to have everybody back next year. And I'll tell you, one of the motivating factors of that is everybody is excited to play with Charlis Leger-Walker. She, but just such a credit to her character. She's the mother of the team right now. She is the one, probably one of the most trusted people. She's had such an incredible impact, and she's never played a game yet. She actually just started practicing a few weeks ago. So I just, we are so excited about the way that she's going to impact our program. She already has on so many levels. But I had to pull one of our players aside the other day and go, You can celebrate Charlis for months to come in the off-season, but let's celebrate the people you're going to play with right now, okay, first. And she's like, Oh, okay, I lost track, it's just so fun. And Charlis is, I mean she's going to be one of the most elite guards in the country, and she's been an

incredible addition to our team and we're really excited to help her see that impact in between the lines as we have seen it behind the scenes this year.

Q. You guys are obviously in a time of year where you can only focus on what's in front of you, but the basketball world keeps spinning, and the portal opened this week. Your program has benefitted from the transfer portal. I'm curious in this time how has a staff you balance both transfer portal recruiting and Sweet 16 prep, and then kind of more broadly I know that the timing changed, it opened after the Selection Show last year, now it opens this week, like is there a better time of year for this to happen?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, and I will -- this is a little dangerous for me to get into this, but I do think an unintended consequence, I thought it was good that we moved it back, I guess, but an unintended consequence that I think is that it's also affected the coaching carousel. I think we have been rushing hires so that we could get people in place before the portal, which has distractions from their current teams, which has, you know, I mean, it's just a tough thing -- in addition to portal situations right now. And I am going to be advocating in the off-season that we make another shift. I don't think it's in the best interests of our game and the best interests of our kids and the best interests of our coaches to have that being a distraction in the most magnified time. We need to have our focus on finishing this tournament in the most exceptional way, and I think the timing is taking away from that. I'm very fortunate because I, you know, who know, you never know until the season's over, but I don't have as many spots to be doing that. But I have been on the other side of that, I remember being in the bubble and doing Zooms with portal families at the same time I'm prepping for a game the next day. And I just can't see how that's really a good idea. So I think we made a good step and I honestly didn't anticipate the part about the coaching carousel and how much that would affect things. But I'm seeing it and hearing about it everywhere and I think that's something we got to address immediately.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you, Coach. We'll welcome the UCLA student-athletes in just a moment.

(Pause.)

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

Q. Lauren, you obviously spent some time going up against Wally in practice last year. Just what are you looking forward to in that matchup?

LAUREN BETTS: I think I'm just excited to see her, to be honest. She's one of my dearest friends, and I'm just excited to see her face and obviously competing against her will be really fun. I don't know, I think that her and I obviously go at it and it will just be really exciting to match up against her.

Q. Lauren, Kiki's obviously such a really talented basketball player and we have seen a little bit of her leadership, but for you playing with her, what does she do that makes you better?

LAUREN BETTS: I think I just trust her in her decision-making and obviously we've just had a lot of chemistry over time and that comes with just experience. But I think that Kiki's such a smart player, and when she's out there, I just know she's going to make the right decision. But, yeah, she just works her butt off, and I think that there's just so much trust built. I just love playing with her. She makes me better, I make her better, but I think we just play so well off of each other and it's just really fun to play with Kiki.

Q. Kiki, you guys are back here at the Sweet 16 again. What kind of lesson did you learn from your freshman year, your sophomore year, to now get you in position to potentially get over this hump for this program?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I just think the experience that you get from playing at this stage in this environment. Every team is really good and you've got to be prepared to give it your all and go out there and win. But I think that feeling of not -- coming out here the last two times and not having won really is, like, a sour taste in all our mouths, so I think the extra competitiveness and energy that we'll play with because we don't want to have that same feeling again.

Q. Cori was up here talking about -- along those lines of making it past the Sweet 16 back into the Elite 8, a message that you guys have talked a lot about is just being able to say, I've done everything in my power to be the best player I can be and set up my teammates the best that I can. I guess just what kind of work have you guys really been just putting in to make it so you feel that you can, no matter what happens, stand on that kind of that mentality and that message?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, for me individually, I would say, like, my leadership is something that I have definitely worked on, and I think that obviously losing against SC at home was really hard, but watching the film and communicating with my teammates, I think that continuing to be aggressive and just to let go of things is something that's really crucial for me.

I think that moving forward, I've done a much better job of that and knowing that after games, I can say that I've been the best teammate and that I've been the best leader that I can possibly be, and I think that just helps me play so much better because I feel like I'm playing a lot more present while I'm out there.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think that work started last spring after the season, continued throughout the summer and fall, and just everything in pre-season, just knowing that we individually all have gotten so much better, put in that work to be prepared for any moment that we face, and just to trust in that and be willing to surrender to the results because we know how much we worked.

Q. You guys have played SC a couple times in the season. JuJu, obviously, is done for the year with her ACL. How disappointing is that? Injuries are obviously a part of the sport, but to see even a competitor, but someone who is the face of the sport too, just have her season ended like that.

KIKI RICE: It sucks. I mean, obviously, we play against each other and it's a rivalry, but you hate to see anyone go down with an injury like that. And she's a great player, great person. We all are feeling for her, but we know her recovery is going to be great, and she's going to come back stronger. But we all feel bad and it's tough.

LAUREN BETTS: Everything that she said, pretty much. I feel so sorry for her. I watched it live and it was, like, so hard to watch. I feel so sorry for her, and I feel bad for that team and that program, to be honest. I know she's such a crucial part of that program, and I feel for her as a person. I know that's not something that's easy to come back from, but I know she's going to be okay, so...

Q. Lauren, UCLA's known for National Championships. I think there's, like, 124 national title trophies in the trophy case, but there seems to be a pretty big hole there for women's basketball. How driven are you guys to make sure that you put something in that trophy case?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, we've worked towards it all season. The coaches haven't been taking it easy on us. All of pre-season was hard, all throughout regular season it was hard, so I think we've done the work and we're ready. But I think we're going to just take it game by game and just focus on Ole Miss for right now. But I know what this team wants at the end of the day, and we have all the parts to do it. I just think it's going to be us stopping us at the end of the day, so...

Q. Kiki, how enjoyable is it to have somebody that's

six-seven and can catch anything you throw at her as a teammate inside where you can score at will at times?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, it makes life easy for any point guard playing with her. I mean, look, Lauren catches any pass, finds - out of triple teams, double teams, she finds her shooters on the perimeter and just a great person, a great teammate. So I think that trust that we all have in her and know that we go as Lauren goes is something that we just believe strongly in her and it makes life easy, for me especially, because I know that she has my back down there and is really going to just hold it down. So I'm just really great to be playing with Lauren, not against her.

Q. Kiki, the Sweet 16s you've been in before they were both on the other side of the country. Was it important to you guys to, I don't know, just be on the West Coast this year, does it feel like any advantage, or perk at the very least?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think it is nice just because the flight is a lot shorter. I mean, last year was, like, Albany, like five hours, and time change and all that stuff. So it is, it does feel better for us to be closer, but I do think that having played the Big Ten this year we're used to those cross-country trips and long flights and everything so we would have been fine either way, but it is nice to earn that top seed and to be close to home, especially for our fans, too.

Q. I think Cori mentioned that Tasha leads you guys through these mind gym exercises, what does that exactly entail and how have you maybe benefit from it this season.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think she's great. I love Coach Tasha's mind gyms, they're all amazing. But I think that something that she talked about was like pressure this week and just like identifying exactly what that pressure is for you and how you can kind of just find it and get rid of it and be as present as possible and stay at neutral. I think that, obviously playing in March Madness there's things that's going to go wrong during the game. Obviously you might hear from the crowd, you might hear from the other players, you might not get the calls that you want. But just continuing to play as present as possible and find what you need to do to help your team out at the end of the day, because that's all that matters is our inner circle and not letting outside voices get in the way of that.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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