

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

Friday, March 28, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

UCLA - 76, Mississippi - 62

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

CORI CLOSE: Really grateful, really proud of our team, proud of how we continue just to learn from what does the game teach us and how do we respond, especially in the second half.

But just really thankful for another chance to earn a 1-0, and that's really all I'm focused on. I just feel like -- I was just thinking this morning -- I was writing in my prayer journal. I just was like, how lucky am I to coach amazing young women, to be on the biggest stages, and to have a staff that serves people so selflessly. So I'm just a thankful person, excited to coach another game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for student-athletes, please.

Q. Lauren, I'm going to read this stat to you. You're the first DI player to have 30 points, 10 rebounds, 80 percent shooting from the field in back-to-back games in the last 20 seasons, any game, doesn't matter, tournament, conference tournament, regular season. How would you describe what your mindset has been this tournament the last few games in particular and what's allowed you to do that?

LAUREN BETTS: Honestly, I feel like ever since our loss to SC, I've just completely changed my mindset going forward, I think just being aggressive no matter what and



doing whatever I need to do to help my team and continuing to be positive regardless of what happens.

And I think Ole Miss is a really aggressive, scrappy team, and I think that tonight, I just kind of assumed, like, I'm not going to get any calls, but no matter what I'm going to continue to play my game and I just think that helped me throughout the game.

But that's insane. Like, I'm just obviously very grateful and, honestly, the only reason any of that is happening is because of the program that I'm in and the people that I'm surrounded by and these coaches believe in me and that's the reason why I play the way I play, so...

Q. Second consecutive game you guys were close at the half and you pull away. What did you specifically learn from this game that you can apply moving forward?

KIKI RICE: I think the biggest thing we talked about at halftime and we'll need to carry on to the next game is rebounding. Ole Miss is a great rebounding team. So is LSU. They have some great rebounders on their team. So I think just focusing on how can we excel in that area and dominate the boards both offensively and defensively because we're going to need that in order to win going forward.

Q. Lauren, you had that offensive foul early in the game where you turned, and I think you came out and then came back in. Was there any sort of mental reset you needed to do or needed a blow and right back to dominating?

LAUREN BETTS: I just needed to breathe. I was, like, dying a little bit in the first half. It was just such a fast-paced game. But I think that Coach Shannon just pretty much told me just deeper seals so that you don't even have to put the ball on the floor. I'm playing against smaller posts, so I don't really need to do too much, just turn and shoot.

Q. Kiki, you guys started the second half, Londynn hit a three, you had two quick baskets, and you guys were off to the races. What were they doing differently or



was that just all of your mindset that we need to get off to a fast start and we need to just put the foot on the gas?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think it was the adjustments we made at halftime. We felt like we're better than one point, better than Ole Miss, and that was the score at the half, but we needed to come out and play our game, rebound the ball, take care of the ball, and just continue to follow the game plan.

But I think it was kind of a little bit of a mindset shift and just going out there, being tough. They played really hard, and they play really hard, so we'll need to continue to do that on a consistent basis, not just starting in the second half, but from the tip.

Q. Lauren, in addition to some of the offensive numbers that were read off, you held Ole Miss players to 2-13 shooting when you were the contest. What was your mindset on the defensive end tonight and having that two-way performance?

LAUREN BETTS: I think I take a lot of pride in my defense. That's something that the coaches have always held me accountable to, and I think that's something that I just try to bring to my team, is that, like, competitive edge when it comes to defending. Even in practice, I just like to bring as much energy as I can. But I think that if the guards are getting hit through screens, like, anyway that I can help them out, that's what I'm going to do, and that's something that I've always brought to this team, but, yeah, so...

Q. The last time that UCLA was in the Elite 8 Michaela Onyenwere was on the team. What's your relationship like with her and what's it like to share that accomplishment with another Grandview graduate?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I love Michaela so much. Obviously, she's from where I'm from in Colorado, and she went to my high school, and I look up to her so much. So to be where, obviously, she's at is just, like, such a huge accomplishment for me and this team, and I'm just so proud of all these girls. We've worked so hard to get here, and I'm just so proud of the selflessness. I think to get to this point, it doesn't matter who is having their best game. It's just getting wins at the end of the day. So it took a lot of grit from everybody tonight, but I'm just so proud of this program.

Q. Kiki, this was your guys' third try at a Sweet 16 and to finally get over that hump and get a win, what does that do for you guys mentally to know that there's no curse or anything but also just how does it feel?

KIKI RICE: For sure it gives us a lot of confidence. We all expected to be here, though, so it's -- we're obviously glad we have the opportunity to play again and play on Sunday, but we expected to be in this position and it will be a good opportunity for all of us who were on this team last year because LSU's the team that knocked us out. So, obviously, we want to come out, play hard, and play really well against them, but we're just excited for the next game.

Q. Kiki, what is it like for -- this Junior class particularly has gone through a few different iterations, added a few people, but for you, Londynn, and Gabs to stay together from freshman to juniors what is it like going on this journey with them?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, it's everything. I think the best part about these few years at UCLA have been the friendships and my teammates and all the experiences we've had. So just to go out there and -- we came here to make this program and continue to help us get better and to get to the Elite 8, to get to the Final Four, to win a National Championship, and to know that we're taking the steps in the right direction, it means a lot to us.

And we just have to thank everyone, all our coaches, everyone in the program, all our donors, everyone who is involved, and we're just grateful for the opportunity.

Q. Kiki, I noticed you had some words for your teammate by the end of the game, and I just want to know while up double digits, what kind of mistakes are you looking for in a team like yourself -- or like your own?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think even though we were up a little bit at the end, I think it's continuing to be as mistake-free as possible and to not make mental errors because those are the ones that when we get in closer games, we're going to need down the stretch. And I think, obviously, we're not going to play an errorless game, but I think to continue to cinch up all the small things and to have great communication to bounce back really well from any small things. But as the point guard and as the leader of this team, I have to continue to help to get everyone on the same page, and I'll take responsibility for a lot of those errors, but I'll continue to hold everyone accountable as well.

Q. Kiki, obviously you're focused on the result while you're in the game, but are you ever able to appreciate in the moment like, oh, my God, like, what in the world is Lauren doing? What's it like being on the court as that's going on?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, look, I'm honestly pretty used to that at this point. She's so dominant every day in practice, and I know you guys don't see it, but it's just like every single day she comes with the same consistency, and she's just so great, so I think when we do get in games, it's like throw the ball up to Lauren. She will score, get me an assist. But I think just having her on my team, I'm so grateful to have her on my team and not be playing against her.

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

Q. Lauren's efficiency tonight, what stood out to you about whether it was her shot selection or the pure dominance that she displayed? It seems like she could get any kind of shot that she wanted.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, and there's been maybe only -- they tried to double a few times, but for the most part, they played one-on-one with Lauren, and they relied on their pressure on our guards to try to make that difficult. And they did a few times, but every timeout you could tell it was just like get Lauren touches, something good's going to happen, and it's not just -- she made the one mistake where she took an extra dribble, and they came -- on the turnover.

But outside of that, when they came with two, we went inside out for the three and were successful at that. So it's just one of those things. You have a generational player on your team. She's not only dominant for herself, but she makes everybody on the floor better, and so you just want to put the ball in her hands as many ways and as many times as possible.

One of the other adjustments that we made in the second half is we just -- and credit to Ole Miss' defense. One of the best ways we get Lauren the ball is from a different offensive set that we just were not able to create enough catches and ball reversals to do that. So we just said, hey, we're going to play through the middle of the floor and try to get all kinds of different ways to go high-low, and that made a huge difference because it's a lot harder to double-team when you're entering the ball from the middle of the floor or from the slots.

So that was a really good adjustment that credit to my coaching staff that is always giving me great suggestions in game. But Lauren is a dominant player on both sides of the ball, and she has been, and I think she's -- that's why she's one of the top players in the country, and that's why she makes us better, and that's why we're in the Elite 8.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Kendall. You played her a few minutes tonight, played her against Richmond in

the round of 32. Obviously, there's going to be a little hiccup as a freshman, but just what have you seen from her out of this season and just how do you see her role shaping up as you go on?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think both Kendall Dudley and Elina Aarnisalo have been -- they were really key for us. Elina played almost 19 minutes against a pressure team, and then Kendall came in and played almost seven and a half. They have done the work. I trust 'em. I think they know who we are and what we're about. Especially when I feel like we need a spark, Kendall Dudley does it with her defense. She gets a loose ball, she gets it with a rebound. She really understands how to be a great cutter. A lot of people double off of her and try to do that. Well, she's just been a surgeon with how she's found seams, and if you're going to do that, fine. I'm going create cuts to the basket off of that.

But just I'm proud of all of our new players, and even the ones that aren't getting rewarded in games, they're doing their work to get better every day. And that's what I ask of our players. Every day, you have a responsibility to intentionally grow and you have a responsibility to give to your team. And they have all done that.

But Kendall Dudley -- this is a huge compliment. I think she's our next Gabriela Jaquez in the way she affects the game. She just keeps working and working. But I really believe, and that's high praise because Gabs is one of the toughest, most influential scoring players that we never run a play for, and I really believe that Kendall will take the baton from her and play that exact level of impact on our team.

Q. You guys did it against Richmond and again tonight. You go on these really quick scoring runs that pile up points and flip the momentum of the game. How dangerous does that make a team when you have the ability to do that, not just that have you the different options, but that you guys can score as quickly as you did?

CORI CLOSE: Well, but it all came off our defense, right? And it's because Ole Miss is such a good defensive team, when we're able to get stops and rebounds, we're able to execute and make them play in space and do some things offensively that are harder when we have to take it out of the basket and go versus their press and all of those things.

But it's so huge. That's why it turns so quickly, is it's turning defense into offense. So that's really where we've got to hang our hats. And we still have room to grow. I really challenged our guards after the game about our ball

screen defense and what we're going to have to do versus Williams and Flau'Jae, and then our rebounding. We gave up 20 O boards and we're about to play one of the second leading double double person in NCAA history in Morrow. So I mean, we still got room to grow and we got things we got to step into, but that is how we're built, is defense and rebounding, and that makes our offense and all of our weapons just shine more.

Q. You've always talked about learning and learning and learning. In a short window where you play Sunday at noon, is learning about what happened tonight that you put or is it film study? If you can kind of talk me through that.

CORI CLOSE: A little bit of both. It's learning and responding. Like, okay, what is the team going to need me to do in responding to what happened? Like, how do I be a better box-out player? How can I show up for my team a little bit better? So it's responding to what the game taught.

And then every scout provides a learning opportunity, and this is where I actually really draw on our participation in the PAC 12 because every weekend was like this. So in fact, even in the Big Ten this year, which I'm so proud to be a part of, the reality for us is we would treat second games in a road trip or second games with one day preps, even if we had more time, just because we know we're preparing for such a time as this.

So I feel like it's what we've been practicing. Our team is really good at learning from film. Obviously, we're not going to be on our feet very much. But the scouting report versus LSU number one, as Lauren referred to, they beat us last year, or maybe Kiki said that.

But two, it's a very hard scouting report to execute, but it's not complicated. So from that perspective, I think it's really going to be about a gut check and a level of focused concentration over a 40-minute period. So we started really well tonight, we had a really good third quarter, but can we have more poise and consistency in the middle of the fight. And those are some things we got to respond to and get better.

Q. The adjustments you make at halftime, how do you get a team -- because this is -- like, these third quarters have been going on for weeks now, actually. What is it that you get them -- how do you get it to sink in?

CORI CLOSE: I always say that if I'm going to take credit for adjustments at halftime, then I have to take responsibility why we didn't do it for better for the whole first half. Number one, I have an elite staff. So right away, we're talking about, okay, how do we make the adjustment

to be able to play through the middle of the floor better, what is that going to look like. In this case right here, Coach JC, it was his scout, so I went immediately to him. Like, what do you think our response needs to be?

I really rely on whoever's person it was their scout to, like, let's work through the two to three things that we need to tweak at halftime to come out and play better.

But I really do. Like, every time someone says that, I'm like, well, I'm sure a screw-up in the first half, then. So I just think it's a matter of every -- every timeout, every opportunity, can I be there for my team, and whatever that looks like to be there for them, to help them see the game or see it through a lens that maybe they're not seeing it through, or make an adjustment that maybe they couldn't make on their own. But our job is to prepare and empower them and then to adjust and equip them as the game goes along and it's our privilege to do so.

Q. There's a lot of really good teams in the country, but I feel like championship teams require a great player, and I'm wondering when did you realize Lauren could be that great player and how has it been to watch her sort of deliver on what you believed in her?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think that throughout the Big Ten -- and shout out to the Big Ten in terms of having 12 teams in the NCAA tournament and they -- the Big Ten has prepared us. But watching her play all the different styles of play throughout the Big Ten and finding a way to be dominant in so many different styles. This is a lot like playing SC, the style, the grind it out, very physical game.

But then we play -- we were pushed to the brink by Iowa. You know, just all these different examples, and I get in trouble when I name too many. But the reality is is that whether the game was spread you out, like Richmond, and she has shown she can do that and switch and play people out there. She's so smart. It didn't take long to figure out what she could become.

And I think it's been very well documented that it's really the courage of her inner work that she's been willing to do that few adults are courageous to do, and she inspires me in terms of how she's willing to attack things that are getting in her way.

I think last year, she almost got too good too quick, and that's been sort of documented that that was really hard. Well, she's now done all the work in this off-season to now be equipped to be that good. And I knew last year she could become that, but now she's equipped from the inside out to sustain that. And she's just an amazing player on both sides of the ball and she makes everybody else

around her better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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