

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Final - LSU vs UCLA

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

**UCLA Bruins**

**Cori Close**

**Londynn Jones**

**Kiki Rice**

**Lauren Betts**

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. Welcome UCLA coach, Cori Close, to the stage. Do you have an opening statement?

CORI CLOSE: Sure. Just, obviously, really thankful to have another opportunity to try to go 1-0. We obviously have familiarity with LSU and meeting them in the Sweet 16 last year, but reality is LSU knows how to win and they have proven that year after year, and so it's going to take a great effort by us.

We thought that boxing out Ole Miss was tough. LSU's an even better offensive rebounding team. They obviously have lots of weapons, and they play with great confidence and aggression, and Kim Mulkey is one of the best to ever do it.

And so lots of respect for their team, but also really believe in who we are and it's going to take the best version of ourselves, but we wouldn't want to be in any other position.

THE MODERATOR: Open it up to questions.

**Q. You mentioned the familiarity with LSU. What do you remember of that Sweet 16 matchup and how much do you take from that, even though it was a year ago, and apply it to this year's game?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, you know, I think they have some similarities in style of play and go-to actions, especially to get Williams involved in terms of how they're going to her. I think they're going to her a little bit more, obviously, than



they were last year - or you know, with Angel Reese being on their team.

So I think there's some personnel switches in terms -- that don't apply and allow us to have some different matchups than we played with a year ago. At the same time, I think there are some real similarities in the actions that they run and the style in which they play defense and in the way in -- just in the way in which they play the game.

**Q. Two monster games last night for Lauren and for Aneesah. How will they be the focus, you think, of both teams going in?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think in different ways, but both of them are dominant in their own way. It's not like Morrow sneaks up on anybody that is she's a good rebounder and still in spite of that, she just finds a way. Her relentless effort is -- I'm not sure I've seen anybody with that kind of relentless offensive rebounding effort actually since Michaela Onyenwere who played for us and is now in the WNBA. It's just so impressive.

But the way in which she exerts her dominance is on the offensive glass and then really being crafty around the rim or attacking from the high post off the dribble. So that's going to be our challenge, is to try to mitigate that and to play -- get them out of rhythm. They want to get her clean scoring catches or they want to take predictable shots that she can go rebound.

So that's -- I think we're going to try a lot of different schemes to try to -- and different matchups to try to make her feel uncomfortable. And we likened it a little bit to how we tried to make Madison Scott's touches a little bit more difficult last night and with different people and in different ways. I never thought she got going in that particular game. Now, some other people did, but not her. So Morrow creates some of those.

Lauren is a -- you know, she's not going to be doing it -- attacking off the bounce as much and some of those things, but we need to get her -- watching the film, you talk about -- it does inform us a lot by watching the film, and one of the things that it informs us is that Lauren Betts is a



lot better basketball player, and she was good in that game, but she's, as you said, dominant now.

But we got to get her deeper scoring touches. They're going to try to push her out. They're going to try to make her put the ball on the floor in order to get closer to the basket, and that allows them to bring a double team. We call it no move needed. We need deeper seals so that when she gets her touch, there's no move that's needed. She can just turn and go score.

So it's going to be important that your big dogs have to show up in big moments, and that will be important for both teams.

**Q. You mentioned last night about how -- the work that Lauren has done, but I'm wondering psychologically or emotionally how is this team different than last year and how is it built to maybe withstand late runs, things that you encountered in last year's game?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think that -- I think we've earned a different level of confidence. I think we're a much -- even in the adverse moments, I would say a word we've really used with this team is poised. They don't get rattled too much, and sometimes to a fault in the fact of, like, let's go, guys, let's go, let's not wait for this to happen, you got to go take it.

But the flip side of that is they also don't panic when things don't go their way. I think we did have some -- maybe panic is too strong a word, but we definitely didn't like the way in which we approached our game with LSU last year, both physically and our tempo and aggression, but also mentally in terms of our confidence that we came into the game with, and I think this year this team has earned different levels of confidence and aggression that I think puts us in a better position to be our best.

**Q. Lauren's a big part of your game plan, but LSU, really good at crashing the glass, they score inside a lot. This is going to be a big -- even more important game for her, but how much is it everyone else also needs to do their part just to help alleviate that? I think she said in the first half, she was dying yesterday just because of how gassed she was.**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it was just such a physical game. You don't think about the -- the pace of play wasn't as up and down as we would have liked it, actually, and that we're used to, but the physical nature of what she has to exert against is significant.

I think that reality for us is you hit it on the head. We know what we're going to get from the stars. I think it's who are

those other people that are going to step up in unexpected ways. What's that -- we call 'em assist box-outs, that somebody else, a guard, rotating and helped the helper that's going to drive their player out that someone else runs down the rebound.

I think it really is going to come down to other people going, okay, this is what it looks like for me to be an elite teammate for this game, and this is what it looks like for me to make our team better for this game. And I really think that what Lauren has proven over along sample set and a long period of time, she's -- we're going to find ways to get her touches and it's going to go through her. But I think the game will be decided by who else steps up.

**Q. A lot of the players talked about how last year's game made them evaluate how they wanted to get better. I was wondering for you after last year, how did you spend the off-season thinking about how you could get better as a coach?**

CORI CLOSE: Lots of different things, but I think one of the things -- I think two areas really started to come to the surface as I did my deep dive into how I needed to be better in the off-season. Just like I expect them to add to their tool box and to respond and grow, I expect the same of myself.

One is we have been a really good special situations or out-of-timeout team in past years. Last year we were not. And I had to take responsibility that there were about three games that I thought I wasn't my best for them in those scenarios. So we had made a huge commitment, even starting in the summer, which I have never done before, working on special situations, two for ones, closing out quarters, how we shift things out of timeouts, what our go-to plays are going to be that we only run in certain scenarios, all those special situations things.

And then I think really getting our team to be able to play through chaos. I think that we're sort of -- we were sort of a mechanical -- way too mechanical last year, and I needed to look in the mirror and go, How did I contribute to that? Like, what was that? Because I want a team that's disciplined but that's -- that plays it like an art project, not a scientific formula. And I had to go, okay, there's a theme here last year that isn't just their fault. It's got to be my fault, and so really have tried to empower them more, create chaotic situations in practice, create adverse scenarios.

I'm the least favorite coach from pretty much November to through, and I think that's -- it had to be my role. I needed to push them out of that comfort zone and create the struggle and adversity that was going to make them learn

to be empowered to make their own decisions. So those are two things that I felt like I needed to respond to from last year.

**Q. I was going to ask about the loss to USC, but I'm curious, how do you do that at practice, sort of create chaos?**

CORI CLOSE: Oh, there's a variety of different ways. Sometimes I actually -- the UConn team is in our hotel and actually I've picked Geno's brain a lot on that. Sometimes it's put an extra defender on there, sometimes creating a drill that you're automatically at a disadvantage, sometimes giving three in a row terrible calls, sometimes telling the scout guys to cheap shot 'em -- I mean, not dangerously. So it's a lot of different ways. Sometimes it's telling our point guards, You can't run a play, You got to make a play, and defining what that looks like, and then showing them on film.

So I just think it's, you know, trying to teach the game and teach them how to play it as opposed to just calling a bunch of plays.

**Q. What do you expect from Flau'Jae Johnson after an off night for her?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's sort of scary because you don't really see her have two off nights in a row, right? But I think the reality for her is how she gets going is in transition. So our ability to value the ball, not have live ball turnovers, and also to have really quality shot selection so that we can play -- set our transition defense effectively.

I can't remember, I probably have it here, but what percentage of her shots come in transition, but it's really, really high. So if you're talking about a player, the two ways to get going is get out in transition and get to the free-throw line, so to be really disciplined with her, to not foul her, and to send multiple defenders in transition situations so that we get it out of her hands.

But, man, she really is a great player. And talk about someone who's been great for the game. I just really admire how she's juggled all the different things that she does in life, let alone on the court, and I'm a big pioneer -- try to be, of growing the game, and I look to her. She's doing a great job, and I just want to compliment her for that, and our game is better off for it.

**Q. The efficiency with which Lauren was playing obviously last night, is that a direct result of those deep touches that you're talking about?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah. And I think it's also a direct result of

the work she does after practice every day with Coach Shannon and our scout team guy, Johnny. I have to give him a shout out. He's been really instrumental in making practice really harder than any defender she's going to have to face in the game, and literally they work on those deep touches, trying to get in spaces where she doesn't have to dribble. And then also working on her offhand. She literally -- it's the very first thing she does in her post-practice work every single day, and it's just gotten more and more and more efficient.

And this is, like, the fourth game in a row we're telling -- a lot of this credit goes to Lauren, but that's why we get so angry with them when we turn the ball over in careless situations, because if we don't turn it over -- I mean, we're shooting over 60 percent as a team. We get great shots. We have a lot of weapons. So it's just really important that we value those possessions and value the ball because we're a very efficient basketball team when we do.

**Q. In each of the last two games the team has struggled a little bit in the second quarter. How do you get them to play better -- to play a more complete game moving forward as the level of difficulty increases?**

CORI CLOSE: We did talk about that. Everyone always wants to ask me about what we say at halftime because we've had unbelievable third quarters. But just get a new coach for the second quarter, and then we'll be back and take care of business after that.

But the reality -- we just told 'em -- you know, they come out really, really focused and it actually comes back to that chaos situation. We said you start really well in terms of executing the game plan and what we're doing, and then we come out when we can regroup after halftime, but in the middle of the battle, you know, you-all have to catch that because we can't call timeout every possession and be like, okay, let's regroup here, right?

So we just really talked about in that film session today, like, when those runs happen and what led to those and how do we go about being more self-aware of where we're vulnerable in those second quarters and tighten those things up that are consistently leading to us having a little dip.

**Q. Curious how you think LSU's defense has changed since last year and more or less physical than Ole Miss?**

CORI CLOSE: That's pretty close. I would say maybe -- they're not up pressuring full court. They're not denying as much one pass away. I think they're just as physical. Just

as physical but different style in the way that they effectively defend.

We had trouble reversing the basketball last night and them all out in the -- Ole Miss out in the passing lanes. But I think that they're really aggressive and try to poke but from more of a conservative position. They really want to load the paint and keep everything in front of them. So our challenge is going to be to change their angles off the screen, to create ball reversal, to do more off the pass. We're not going to try to get downhill versus them, like we really wanted to attack.

When we didn't get the ball to Lauren, we wanted to attack downhill and try to attack the space that they create by getting out in those passing lanes. Well, I think it's going to be really different in this particular game. So our offensive package, I think, will be significantly different than it was against Ole Miss, but both equally physical.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll be back with the UCLA student-athletes in just a moment.

We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Lauren, you mentioned last night after the game that it was physical. You played through it because you didn't expect to call or anything. Do you think it's going to be even more physical against LSU?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, for sure. We've played them before. They're a really physical, really aggressive team. Obviously matching up against Morrow, she's going to be super physical and want to get every single rebound. So just making sure that we come out with that mentality that we're just not going to let that happen, and we're going to attack from the very beginning, and I think that just starts with warm ups, it starts with just making sure we're prepping the right way.

**Q. What do you remember from last year's game and how and why do you think that you are a different team and one that can handle the late-game situation than you did last year?**

KIKI RICE: Yeah, definitely I think we all remember a lot about the game, the intensity, how physical it was, what a great matchup it was. Obviously, we didn't come out on top last year, but I think just everything that we learned from their style of play and how we needed to come out and how we needed to be more prepared and just and tougher team. A lot of our learning from last year were from that game, and I think how we've attacked this season as an entirety and as a whole has really prepared us really well for tomorrow's matchup. But we'll be prepared. We'll

be ready. We have great team, great staff that will prepare us, so I'm excited.

**Q. Coach Yo was talking about last night one of the things that she couldn't believe about your team was that you had players like Janiah and Timea coming off the bench. How has it helped you and what's impressed you about the way that they have embraced their roles as to bring that energy off the bench?**

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, I think we have just a really good team and a part of that is how deep we go. So it's just any given night where anyone can do their thing coming off the bench, it really doesn't matter, we just know our role. I think that goes to show you how powerful our team is, and so when they get on the court, there's no telling what they can do, and I think that's just the depth of it, yeah.

**Q. Kiki, I think you kind of touched on it, but Coach also said the differences from last year that you guys took were maybe more mental and confidence and maybe approach mentally. Is that accurate? Do you feel like you guys have a tougher mindset going into this game or because of the things that you learned about in that game last year?**

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. I think we felt like last year LSU was the tougher team in that matchup and a lot of our work during the off-season, just throughout this entire year, has been how can we kind of build that collective toughness to be ready for those matchups and be ready for physical teams, be ready for these kind of environments, and I think everything that we have worked on will prepare us for our game tomorrow, and I'm just really excited for everyone to see that.

LAUREN BETTS: Like she said, I think this season, we've overcome a lot of adversity and we've beaten really physical teams, and so I think just learning from that, I think we have a lot of confidence going into tomorrow.

**Q. Londynn, speaking to that, Cori was talking to us about how she tried to create chaos in practice by doing things that may have annoyed you guys, but how do you think that's helped you just have a stronger mindset being able to play through, chaos, weird situations to be able to get here.**

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, it's prepared us for adversity. We face different a lot of different teams, and so it's prepared us for that. And I think just going into practice with the mentality of, like, we need to get better and we need to figure it out no matter what's still in our way, and I think that's helped during the season because, like I said,



we've been thrown with so many different things, so many different teams, different dynamics, matchups. So it just matters to go, like, preparation, I think it's a really big thing for preparing us for where we want to go.

**Q. Lauren, I wanted your thoughts on the way Aneesah Morrow plays as an undersized player. And although LSU doesn't have Angel Reese anymore, Sa'Myah has really come on the last couple games. Can you talk about their post play?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think they're both really talented. Morrow, she's just a beast on the boards, and we're obviously looking through the film today. I think tomorrow we're just going to have to come out with a really physical mentality and just making sure that we don't rely on our height, that we actually find a body and box somebody out. So I think that's going to be really important.

And, yeah, I think both of them just really skilled, and I think -- as far as I think we're just going to have to really step up and just making sure that we follow the scout and we know what we're going to do, but we can't go out there and just let the game kind of come to us. We have to come out with that mindset that we're just going to attack them first and be the aggressors.

**Q. What stands out to you about LSU's three-headed dog of Aneesah, Flau'Jae and Mikaylah?**

KIKI RICE: Yeah, obviously a great trio of players right there. They're a great team in general. I think what Lauren said, they look like a great rebounding team, and also a great mid-range scoring team. For us to be able to identify what they like to do, they like to get second chance put backs, Mikaylah and Flau'Jae like to operate out of those ball screens. As guards I think for us being able to defend those is going to be crucial. And for our forwards boxing out, and our guards helping with that as well. But I think we're going to be prepared for their style of play, and we played a lot of teams that are similar, and I think that's one of the best things about our conference, we've had a lot of different matchups that have kind of allowed us to get used to playing different styles of play, and, yeah, we're excited for the opportunity.

**Q. Lauren, as far as preparing for physicality one of the things that Cori mentioned was your work with Coach Shannon and I believe it's Johnny from the practice squad. What does that sort of consist of, and how does that prepare you?**

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, Johnny, all of 'em. I mean, we can go down the list of all the posts that we have in our practice squad, they're all really physical and they really

don't ever take it easy on me, so I think that's just prepared me and made me a lot better throughout the season. And, I mean, I think, yeah, just going into every scout they're always just doing their best to make sure that I'm mentally and physically prepared to whatever I have to go to. So I think just using that just going into tomorrow, I think just trusting my work that I put in and just, I think that's going to give me the confidence.

**Q. Kiki, UCLA has never made a Final Four. Given you all have had a terrific season and have done, have accomplished a lot of milestones, but do you have to get to a Final Four and then a championship game to kind of validate everything that's, that you have done this season?**

KIKI RICE: We're taking it one game at a time focused only on our next opponent. Obviously right now focusing on LSU. I think the most important thing for us this season is just the growth that we experienced and how much better we've gotten as a program, and that will continue to kind of lay the ground work and the standard going forward for many years for this program. But yeah, obviously we have aspirations of Final Four and a national title and all of that, but right now we're just focused on our next opponent.

**Q. Coach talked about obviously so much of the focus will be on Lauren and Aneesah and that matchup, but she said it's going to take other players being an elite teammate. So what does that mean to you guys to be that elite teammate, maybe the person that's going to actually decide the game, and how much have you seen that play out this year as Lauren gets so much defensive attention.**

LONDYNN JONES: Yeah, I think, I mean, Lauren gets attention every game, but I think just being really good teammates outside of that. We know that we have to rebound, we know they're a rebounding team, so just helping post players out with that, and I think just being a good teammate as in doing whatever it's going to take for to us win. Whether that's rebounding, playing defense, talking, communicating, whatever it is that your role is, and I think that that's going to be really important. But scout prepares us for that and then I think we know as guards what we need to do upcoming for this game.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, similar, I think it's going to be about playing our role. Obviously a lot of attention will go inside in the forwards, and they're probably going to send a few bodies into Lauren. So as guards whether that means just knocking down those shots, moving off the ball, rebounding, being really good in the ball screen defense, but yeah it's going to be all about playing our role and just stepping up in whatever areas we need to.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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**Q. Did you like playing Ole Miss last night, does it help you guys prepare for LSU and the physicality that you're going to see again?**

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, I think we loved it (laughing). Yeah, I think it was just, honestly, like a really good game to have before going into this LSU game. I mean, they're a really physical team, but we talked about it in film, LSU is going to be even more aggressive, so just making sure that we come out with that same mindset. But just earlier on in the game I think will be super important for us, but I think we're all ready, we put in the work and we feel really confident.

**Q. Gabriela was talking about you off the court and how you do a really good job at separating and not letting basketball be your whole identity. Can you talk about like how that maybe helps just with the mental aspect of the game and not being too hard on yourself when things don't go your way.**

LAUREN BETTS: I think that's something that I've definitely worked on and it's taken me awhile, but I think that not making this my entire world -- obviously things are not going to be perfect all the time -- but not letting this affect like the rest of my life. I mean, I love these girls. Besides just being my teammates, they're also my best friends, so I really prioritize my relationships with them off the floor and making sure that I get that one-on-one time with them is really important to me. But, yeah, I mean, this isn't like my whole identity. I mean, I'm like a whole person besides all of this, so just making sure that I prioritize that as well.

**Q. You mentioned the games that you've had, the conference, non-conference games preparing you for this moment. In a new conference with new teams that you've never played before does that kind of offer a unique preparation for this post-season where you might be matching up with teams from different conferences that you might not know, or is it just Big Ten play, PAC-12 play kind of similar, did it prepare you in a different way?**

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I definitely think this year we played a ton of teams that we hadn't played before and that will for sure prepare us for the NCAA Tournament, and just playing all the different styles of play. But I also think it prepared us from like a travel standpoint. I mean, in the Big Ten we were doing a ton of cross country road trips, a ton of really long flights, and I think that's kind of what you're going to get come tournament time, so I think we're really prepared from that standpoint as well.

