

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

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Gabriela Jacquez

Timea Gardiner

Lauren Betts

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference

UCLA - 72, LSU - 65

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: Just thank you to our alumni. I want to first give a shout out. Many people have said it's the first one in NCAA history -- or UCLA history. It's actually not correct. 1978 AIAW, they won the National Championship and went to the Final Four, and we had some of the alumni here from that team and Debbie Willie Haliday and Denise Curry, and we had so many other alums.

And so I just want to give them their flowers and to say that we are so thankful for the alumni that have supported us along the way, the band, the cheer, the administration, my family. The list goes on and on. But it takes a village to build a program. If you just don't want a team, but you want a true program that impacts people's hearts first, you don't do that alone.

So I just sit here with great pride and gratitude and more than anything else, I'm just so incredibly grateful to be able to be a part of their process. They inspire me every day. The way that they commit to give to each other selfless and sacrificially and intentionally grow and choose a growth mindset, it's not easy. I am one blessed coach.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes, please.



Q. Can you guys, from both of your vantage points, walk us through that final shot from you, Gabriela, that three-pointer?

LAUREN BETTS: Basically, like, I think Gabs and I pretty much always play off of each other, so that was pretty normal. But just the moment was so big. Obviously, like, they had been double-teaming me as I'm trying to score, and then obviously, I just found Gabs, and she stays ready. So I was just so happy for her. I mean, just pure joy (laughing).

GABRIELA JACQUEZ: Yeah, we talk about if Lauren kicks it out, you got to be a ready shooter, and I just got to stay ready at all times. I knew that's the right shot I needed to take, and I have confidence in myself when shooting. I put in the work.

And, yeah, I definitely shot it high because the closeout was there. So me and Lauren were just like -- yeah, but we were just really excited and just really played confidently out there.

Q. Lauren, describe your emotions when you picked up the second foul and you're sitting on the bench and then you're watching your teammates go on a 12-2 run?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I have full confidence in them. Obviously I'm more mad at myself that I had the two fouls. But this is what we're talking about when we have a deep team. I don't have to be in the game at all times. I have a team full of players who are just amazing and talented in their own right, and they put in the work. So I knew that as I was sitting there, I'm going to be the best teammate that I can and cheer them on, but they have my back at the end of the day, so...

Q. Following up on that, Kim said that the game was lost for them in that second quarter because they couldn't take advantage of Lauren being out. What did you guys say to each other when she did pick up that second foul and how did you kind of keep them at bay in that quarter?

TIMEA GARDINER: I think that we just did what we usually do. One person goes down, another person steps up. And as Lauren said, we have a deep team and everyone is ready when their number's called, and so we truly did that and we found each other too and we just played off each other and we just had fun.

Q. Timea, you had 15 points, all off of threes. What was working well for you?

TIMEA GARDINER: Getting good passes from Lauren Betts. Double team and her reads and my teammates finding me and then my job was to just knock it down, so, yeah.

Q. Gabriela, you have talked about last year's loss, how it left a sour taste and really motivated all of you guys. How does it feel to sit up there with a piece of twine in your hands and having the trophy right there?

GABRIELA JACQUEZ: It feels great. Since we lost a year ago today, we just really remembered that, and we used that as fuel, and our coaches said, which I think is really good to understand, is that our programs are playing against each other, but they're brand-new teams.

So we have a lot of confidence in our team, and we've all gotten better, we all have grown from that, and we've added new members, and I just couldn't be more proud to be a part of this team.

Q. Timea, I was talking to your dad out there, and he said when you got ready to transfer, your heart was set on UCLA, he said, even though you might play a smaller role or something like that. For you to have gone through this whole season stepping up when they need you and then have this moment, was this what you envisioned when you made that decision?

TIMEA GARDINER: I mean, who doesn't want to win a Final Four? No, but I had connections with a lot of the players previously, so I knew. And me and Coach Cori Close, we were really close out of high school when she recruited me. So I knew I was like, yeah, I'm coming to UCLA. And I think everyone else knew that too.

So I'm so happy to be here and to contribute to the success of this team and really, though, I'm just so excited to celebrate and all of our hard work paid off.

Q. I was talking to Denise after the game and to your point, the path that she blazed for you, can you talk about what having her here today means and just having her around the program all year and kind of inspiring you in a way?

CORI CLOSE: Maybe you guys as players can talk about Denise being a season ticket holder and those alums supporting us, and then I'll comment because I'm supposed to go last.

GABRIELA JACQUEZ: We appreciate the alumni. They're always supporting us, and we appreciate that so much, just to come out in Spokane and support us. We understand that it's not easy, and you got to take a flight and all the things that go into it. But, yeah, it's really important that we remember our alumni and understand what they have done for us. We can be succeeding and they have, like you said, blazed that trail for us.

Q. Gabs, obviously you came in as a part of a heralded class and now you guys are going to the Final Four. How does it feel?

GABRIELA JACQUEZ: It feels great. Everyone came to UCLA for this reason, to do something we haven't done in a really long time or in the NCAA era, and so just really proud, proud of my teammates, the staff, the coaches of just continuing to get better every day and grow from each season prior and -- yeah, I just don't even have words, just so proud.

Q. How does this feel, especially after such an aggressive game? I know I saw a lot of blood, amongst other things. So how do you prepare with that, especially with that one-day, like, difference between Ole Miss and now, and then especially between quarters when you're seeing how much more aggressive it's getting throughout the game?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think we were prepared mentally going into this game that it was going to be a battle, and Coach Cori continued to say that to us every single day leading up to this game. And Ole Miss, she's like, It's going to be battle. Mentally prepare yourself. It's not going to be easy, but we're going to get it done.

I think that we just have been ready for this. We prepared, we put in the work, and obviously, we played LSU last year. We know what kind of team they are. But I just think that a lot of the mental preparation that went into the game, I think it starts with our coaches, and Coach T especially, I mean, just holding us accountable in the film room, making sure that we take off all of the pressure that's on us, and just focus on what we need to do today, and I'm just so proud of everyone and the way they showed up.

TIMEA GARDINER: Yeah, Lauren kind of said it all. No, you're good. It makes my job easier.

No, but I think we all were prepared. We all knew what it was going to take and at the end of the day, we were just playing for UCLA as a whole. We were -- yeah, we got the dub and, yeah, I don't even know what to say (laughing).

GABRIELA JACQUEZ: Yeah, they said it, but I would also say, like, how preparing was pretty quick turnaround. We're used to it. All three of us played in the PAC-12, and we get one day prep, so it's really nothing new. Our coaches do a great job of preparing us and just focusing on the scouts, focusing on what we can control on the court, and you can see us succeed.

Q. Lauren, you guys have talked about last year not winning the toughness battle in this game with LSU and then in the USC games not winning that toughness battle as well. Do you feel like you guys answered that for yourselves in this game, that you were able to win gritty when you were pushed to the wall?

LAUREN BETTS: I mean, there were lots of things that we could have gotten down about this game. I mean, obviously we had fouls, we had people maybe not getting calls or whatever, but I think we were just all mentally prepared and we've toughened up since, I don't know, mid-season. Like, we've learned a lot.

I think that as teammates, we just continue to hold each other accountable, and I just think it's worked so much for us. But I think there's obviously been a lot of work that's gone into today and, like I said before, I'm just really proud of our group. We worked so hard.

Q. Is any part of you pulling for USC tomorrow?

LAUREN BETTS: What kind of question is that? (Laughing). Yeah, no comment.

TIMEA GARDINER: No comment (laughing).

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse you to the locker room and take questions for Coach.

Q. I know that you guys are really big on visualization. You do it in practice, you do your mind gym. Curious, have you visualized this moment before? Is that something that you've done?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I have. But more than anything else, I visualize what it's going to take to get to this moment. I think that's, for me, all the pressure or all the things that can sort of get in your way lie either in worrying about the past or the future. So I just really try to stay focused on what I know to be true about the process that will lead us to where we want to go.

I do have to give mad props to Coach Tasha Brown. She was so brilliant in our locker room and in our prep. Her and Sam Skinner were in charge of the scout. But she had the team. There was so much going back and forth about this same two teams and whatever else, and that's what they were referring to. She said, All the returners stand up. And she went through and just blew wind into their sails and spoke life about what they were going to bring and doing visualization right then.

Then she said, Stand up if you're a transfer. And then told them each what they were bringing to this game and what she was going to see from them in this day.

And then she had the freshmen and what it became, very obvious, is that we are a new and different group that had earned a different level of confidence and we were a stronger whole because of what we had been through together. And I just thought she was incredible. And she's always incredible in that.

But I really think there was a mindset. The outside world wanted to make it about the programs going back and forth, and we have so much respect for what LSU has done. They're a perennial power, Kim has won more than almost anyone, and so we have total respect for them.

That being said, we expected to win and we looked around that room and we had visualized it, but more importantly, we committed to execute it.

Q. It's been a long ride for you at UCLA. What does it mean to you that this school has stuck around with you and allowed you to get to this point today?

CORI CLOSE: (Laughing). You know, I remember I texted Dan Guerrero a long time ago -- or a few weeks ago and just said, Thank you for taking a risk on me. I had no head coaching experience when I came here from Florida State 14 years ago. And I had a vision and I believed in surrounding myself with people that were smarter than me and that would be aligned in that vision, but they still had to take a risk on me.

Even outside -- my boss now is Kenny Donaldson, my direct supervisor, and he was our academic person in my first year and now he's my boss, but Christina Riviera was here in administration and took a risk on me. And the list goes on and on. You always get yourself in trouble with that.

But so humbled and grateful that they would believe in this kid from Milpitas that had never been a head coach and more importantly believed in our mission for having a total

collegiate experience and that we -- to truly invest in young women from the inside out and be committed to that first, and that's not an easy risk to take when someone's unproven, and I'll be eternally grateful for that risk that they took.

Q. When Lauren picked up that second foul, what was going through your mind? And when you guys were able to weather that storm, do you agree, like Kim said, that that's where the game was decided that they weren't able to take advantage of that?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I definitely think that helped us in terms of our confidence level. The other part of that equation, not only did Lauren go out, but we have been really struggling in second quarters. So we've been having great first quarters and great third quarters, and we were talking to our team and at the quarter break, we said, Okay, here we go right here. What are we going to do different to come out and execute? We have more than enough and what does it look like to really execute right now? And it wasn't even just about without Lauren. It was like, we want to play better all the way through this stretch.

And so I thought they were very locked in to what that looked like, and we talked about the adjustments we needed to make and how we needed to go about it, and I think we got two kills in that period of time, which is three stops in a row, and that sort of fueled us and got us going with some momentum.

I honestly thought the run -- the game was won when they came back from, I think, we were up 14, I think, at one point, when they came back and I think cut it to five, and I think the game was won in the poise and the choice to go back to neutral, get ourselves refocused, and make the next right step. That's where I think the game was won.

Q. I think it's interesting all three of those players are 2022 top-20 recruits that started their careers at three different schools and are now at UCLA.

CORI CLOSE: How lucky am I?

Q. It's every coach's job to sort of bring a group together and meld them into one. This group, though, with the transfer portal and still having a core, I just was curious how much of a challenge that was and how much of a focus that was for you in getting to this point.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it's a challenge every year, but specifically this year, we had seven new players and six returners, and so how do we become a group that's better together than the sum total of our parts and our talent

pieces. And so from the very beginning, it was obvious that we had enough talent, but we said talent was going to be our floor. Our character, our chemistry, our habits were going to be our ceiling.

So really had that be all of our focus all year long was what does it look like to connect the dots to learn what makes Jannah Barker great, you know, what makes Londynn Jones great and how do we help each other be better because we're teammates than anyone could ever do individually on their own.

But it's always a commitment for us, but it was, I would say, a greater challenge this particular year. We went on a team retreat up in Santa Barbara and I remember the discussions that were surrounding it, and it was interesting. As talented as we are and were, the team really said we're not as confident as we seem.

And I remember the night before we played Louisville in Paris, the leadership group got together with Coach Shannon and coach Tasha and said, Hey, we need you guys to blow wind into our sails. We're struggling a little bit right now. And I thought, first of all, it actually takes more strength to say that than it would be to fake it. And now I think about how far they have come and I think about looking in their eyes when LSU cut it to five and to think how far they have come in that commitment and how their connectivity and confidence, and I always say you can't give a team confidence. You have to put them in situations where they can learn to conquer hard things and earn the confidence that they want. And they have done that.

One of the most amazing things. You have two people's numbers that are up in the rafters, and it's Denise Curry and Annie Meyers Drysdale, and they're season ticket holders. I get a text from them almost before every game. Denise is here. Annie would have loved to have been here. I got a text from her this morning. It is way better in life to share it with others and to acknowledge that you didn't get there on your own. And I sure did not get here on my own and we did not get here on our own and we are so grateful for people like Annie and Denise. They could have said, Oh, my gosh, you guys are so spoiled, and, you know, like, if you only knew what we had to do.

And that isn't the case. They have celebrated every step, they have been behind us, they have donated, they have showed up, they have believed in our mission. And I don't appreciate them as much today as I do on the darkest days. That's when they showed up in the trenches with me and said, Hey, hang in there. We believe in what you're doing, and we're behind you a hundred percent. Those are the times I'll never forget. And to have it from the two people that have their numbers in the rafters, that's pretty

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

special, and I'm humbled and grateful.

Q. You guys have been a very efficient and dominant team in the paint.

CORI CLOSE: Not as much tonight.

Q. That was what my question was going to be. What did you think of your team's ability to create offense outside of the paint, and especially those three-point shooters that you had tonight.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, if you would have said, Hey, you're going to win this game by hitting 10 threes, I would have told you you're crazy. This is the lowest field goal percentage we've had in a really long time. But I love it in the fact of that we've always said it's going to be about selflessness and work ethic. And we have -- when we had the real lowest point, and I've shared this before, Charlisse Leger-Walker told our team, Look, you guys, we lost track just for a second, just for a second, that we're playing for the four letters on the front of the jersey, not on the back. And that was not intentional, it wasn't major, but she goes, Hey, we got to tighten that up.

And I'm so proud of Timea Gardiner. Two nights ago she had one of her hardest nights. And I mean it was very uncharacteristic of her. And I wrote her a text yesterday and I just said, these games, you're the one, you're the only one in this group who's been in this position, we need you to respond and we believe in you and you're going to do big things. And I didn't know exactly what it was going to look like, but I was pretty confident she was going to respond in a major way. And she did.

But what if she didn't choose selflessness? What if she didn't choose we over me? She wouldn't have responded and wouldn't have been ready in the way that she did and she didn't respond to her own disappointment. That takes so much character, and that's very difficult to do. And they're doing this all publicly, right, everybody can see they're wrestling. And for her to wrestle through her own chaos and to come in and deliver in such a major way, it just, it's what it's all about, right. And I think that Lauren and Kiki have carried us over and over again. They, there's no question that they're our big dogs, right, and we rely on them so much. And tonight, like Lauren said, it was sort of we had to have their backs a little bit. Now granted, Kiki didn't have the best scoring night, but eight assists and only three turnovers. So many people -- I thought Janiah actually was really big. Her stat line isn't going to show what her moxie brings us. There's something about what she brings. So all of that to say is, it's a long answer to your short question, I apologize, but you can make up sayings all the time, you can put stuff on the back of your

shirts, you can put it up on the wall -- though I will say we have "Believe" on our locker room right now, and I am the biggest Ted Lasso fan of all time, but it doesn't mean anything if it doesn't influence behavior. And I'm so proud that, sometimes you, sometimes me, always us, influenced our behavior tonight.

Q. There was a moment in the third quarter going into a timeout where Lauren stood up and shouted at the bench motivating them. How does it feel to have that kind of leader in your star player, especially in such a big game like this?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it really all goes back to growth and character. To see Lauren take on a leadership voice -- you know, her -- we always say, you can never out perform your self image. And to watch her grow in that from the inside out, and then to see her having confidence that she can influence the team, she can speak her mind, she can play with great passion, she can lead a team. I just, I know what she worked on and I know what she went through to get to that point, and that's what's really cool. But I don't think you can go to Final Fours without your best players being the most selfless and being great leaders. And in both Lauren and in Kiki we have that. And their work ethic also leads the way. So that makes a huge difference. But I'm really more proud of the process of what it took to get there.

Q. You touched on the execution in the second quarter, but I don't think we've ever really seen Lauren get in foul trouble, so for it to happen on this stage what does that say about the mental toughness of your team that they responded?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it says about a lot about the mental toughness of our team and, honestly, she didn't play her best in the second half. She didn't make shots, she brought the ball -- a bunch of different things, she would be the first to say that -- but, to me, a year ago that would have like sent her over the edge in terms of that she would have been so mad at herself and beat herself up so much that she wouldn't have been able to continue to defend, continue to lead, continue to do the other things that we really needed her to do. So when I watch her influence winning in so many other ways, even though she wasn't really making her shots, even though she got in foul trouble in the first half, it's a big deal. And that's, you know, I think every game is going to create sort of chaos, going to create adversity, and which team can respond and have awareness of what that's like and find other ways to make, to affect winning, that's just really cool to see Lauren do that, even after she struggled.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.



CORI CLOSE: Thank you guys, too. It's really big to me. Lots has gone into the regionals, only having two sites, all the different things. But you guys creating the story, you guys continuing to push our sport forward and to tell those, it really makes a difference. So I want to thank you all for being here and for continuing to help us grow our game. Thank you.

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