

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Kansas State vs USC

Friday, March 28, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

Avery Howell

Talia von Oelhoffen

Malia Samuels

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll have an opening statement from Coach and then open it up for questions.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thanks for being here. Thank you to the city of Spokane for a wonderful welcome. It's a great arena. Everything's been first class so far. We are excited to be here.

I'm thrilled to be playing this far with a group that's really united and together. I would also be remiss if I didn't take a minute to say that the outpouring of support for our program and for JuJu Watkins has been unbelievable. I think if you can even fathom the impact that a 19-year-old has had on our university, on our community, on the women's basketball world at such a young age, I think that's been on full display. And like I said the other night, I hope she can really feel the outpouring of love and support. I think she can. Because that's how much she's given to us and the game, and everyone's giving it back to her and she's going to come back stronger than ever.

This team is locked in on continuing our goals, as JuJu wants us to. She's proud of her teammates. She is with us a hundred percent in mind and spirit, if not in her actual body. And this team is really focused on continuing our journey and achieving our goals even though the path looks a little different than it did just a few days ago.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Questions, please.



Q. Your three freshmen have played massive roles throughout the year. What have you seen from their development that makes you feel like they're ready for this stage, particularly having to play a little bit bigger role with JuJu out?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, the great thing is -- and we've told each other this. It's not that I think they're ready. I know they are. Our growth as a team has been dependent on a lot of things, but not the least of which that our freshmen have played incredibly important roles and have made big plays and big defensive stops and big shots throughout the year or else we wouldn't have had the record that we had.

Here we are where. We always say that everybody's role is important, and they have owned that all year, so then you don't have to get ready. They have kind of been ready for these moments and we're completely confident in them.

Q. Geno was talking earlier today about the difficulty of replacing a star player because everyone -- all the other players try to do too much in their plays. How do you balance that -- understanding that with also trying to get the most out of a player or getting more out of your players?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, Geno was one of the first people on my phone, by the way, after our game the other night. I just appreciate him, and Chris Dailey reached out, because obviously they have been through this, and I think you don't feel it unless you've felt it before in that way.

But I think our players -- I don't know, I haven't felt at all like anyone feels like they need to do something that's out of their character. Everyone knows no one is replacing JuJu. She's one of one. But I think they understand that, amongst everybody else, they have played significant roles, they have played important roles. We just need to be the best versions of ourselves, and we need to do that together in order to have success. And I don't think any one person will try to do more than what we know they're capable of, but I also think they're capable of a lot, and we're capable of enormity when we do it together, and that's been the message more than anything else.

Q. Over the last few days, how is JuJu holding up? I'm sure it can't be easy. But also, just as a coach, how do you pour into her going through this difficult time and you're also trying to pour into the team and trying to be present for the games that lay ahead?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, all of that. Just trying to be the human that she needs me to be and being around and the love and support. You know, just gave her a journal to say when you feel it, like, let yourself feel all the feelings that you're feeling because if you do that, then at some point you're able to move on from them and go further in your life.

And we all know I would never wish this upon anyone, I would never want her to go through it and yet, at the same time, you know, she's going to come out stronger than she ever was. So just being there for her, as the team has been as well, and at the same time being really present for what the team needs me to be now as well. While there's no manual for it, that's what we do as coaches, right? Show up for what the moment requires from us, and that's what we'll continue to do over the course of this weekend or this time here and going forward with what it looks like for JuJu and the rest of the players.

Q. A, how are you doing? And also, I wanted to ask you about Talia and her impact this year.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I'm doing well. We're very fortunate to be where we are. There's so much gratitude for playing in the Sweet 16, for having a community and a fan base and a team that showed up the way that they did. Again, you never wish -- no one would have chosen this. But the way the response has been, I think, says more about the character and the teamwork and the culture that we've built than anything else.

So I'm really grateful for all of that while at the same time the juxtaposition of feeling really sad and hurt for the game of basketball and for JuJu at the same time. But I'm great in terms of being able to show up and do what I get to do.

TVO has been tremendous for us, right? And she's back home here in the Pacific Northwest. She's played a role and given us leadership and been what we've needed her to be all year to get to this point. It's not easy to be 30-3 or, you know, whatever we are at this point, and she's been relied upon in a lot of ways and will continue to do that. Her steadying leadership, her shot-making ability, her play-making ability, I think will be a huge part of our ability to be successful going forward.

Q. Can you speak to the balance of what you said at

the beginning that we all know the path will be different and how you mentally, emotionally, help these girls with social media that's out there versus your coaching staff having a new game plan without JuJu Watkins.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, relative to, like, the social media and the stuff that's out there, there's been a spotlight on us all year. We've been in quite a spotlight, I think, because of the success we've had, because of JuJu's magnitude. And they're used to that. And I've just, as we always do, advise them to be conscious of everything that's going on, but I empower them to be who they are, which are genuinely empathetic people. They're hurting and feeling for their friend and teammate. Everyone just loves JuJu so much.

And at the same time their competitive spirit has not been impacted. They're here to win, and they want to win, and we believe that we can win, and I think both things at the time can come forth in their personality regardless of what social media is saying or what people are predicting or all of that. And that's just, I think, the way that we approach it.

Q. You touched on this with his question, but I was curious if you could expand. I know you said Geno and CD reached out. I know Niele Ivey said she reached out. She was the one who really recently went into the post-season without Olivia Miles. Was it more support or did they offer any guidance or advice?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah. I mean, I can't even tell you how meaningful so many of the messages have been, and a lot of people have reached out to me to say, Hey, when JuJu's ready, we can connect. I'm talking about the Candace Parkers of the world who has gone through a knee injury, I think, in high school and ended up having the career that she's had, and Lindsey Harding, I mean, NBA, WNBA. You can all imagine.

But for me, I think the coaches that have reached out, it's just incredibly meaningful. I think they just try and give the support that they can as a friend and colleague and also advice. Niele's obviously been through it with Olivia. She also just had -- her son just recently had a pretty significant injury, and I had reached out to her when that happened. Just to watch a child, whether it's the one that you've given birth to or the one that you coach, go down, it's very hard.

So I do think the women's basketball community is incredibly empathetic, and the people that have built real relationships with, it's meaningful when they reach out and try and offer support and advice.

Cori did the same. You can be rivals, and you can be



competitors, but when this type of stuff happens, I think everyone puts that aside and the real human aspect comes out.

So nothing but support. And again, I think it speaks mostly to JuJu and who she is, and everybody wants her playing basketball and everybody respects who she is as a person and as a player. And then for me, I think colleagues just try and give you the support to go forward and lead your team the way that you know you have to at this time.

Q. At the start of this, you were kind of talking about how people understand that they're not JuJu. JuJu is one of one. No one can replace her. How have you guys kind of -- the turnaround is really quick between that game and this game and the margin of error is very small. You don't have a couple games to get used to this. So just how has the game planing and the adjustments been for you guys as you prepare to play without her?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yep. I mean, maybe that short turnaround time is better. Like, no one has time really to think about that in a deep kind of way. The best thing was that this group rallied and beat a second-round NCAA tournament opponent, a really good opponent, an opponent who had won a lot of games in the SEC by 40 points or something, right? So I think the belief is there. But we know, you know, we've adjusted some things in terms of who is in what spot. You know, there were not a lot of minutes that JuJu is off the floor, so we know certain things that we run, who's in what different spot, what's the look, what's the read, but we got a lot of really good players on the team and it doesn't have to be that the play is made in the same way that JuJu would have made it. It's the play's got to get made. And I think we've just tried to look at reads, we've tried to look at back ends of things, we've tried to move people around and take advantage. But we've prepped for K-State in a way that we would for a two- or three-day prep for anybody with what we have. And, hey, here's the look here, here's the defensive coverage here. And in that way it's been similar, even though obviously the gigantic difference in the personnel is certainly ever present as well.

Q. Not sure how aware you are of this, but there's been a lot of social media attacks and kind of hate directed at Mississippi State and particularly Chandler Prater, saying she maybe tried to injury JuJu, or that the team was playing dirty and a lot of other worse things than that, too. Is that kind of how USC's viewing the whole situation too, or do you think that the team was playing dirty, and there was an attempt to injury JuJu or what's your thoughts?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: A hundred percent no. There was no intent to injury anybody. It was a physical game, but there was clearly no -- no one deserves on-line bullying in any realm, but certainly not a young woman in Chandler, who was trying to make a play, and unfortunately our player got hurt. But there was nothing to me that looked like it had any intent to hurt her, and we would not want -- I mean, that's not an USC view at all. We have really passionate fans, and there's a lot of love for JuJu and I understand people being sad, you know, and hurt that she's hurt, but nobody in our camp feels like there was any type of attack on her and would not support any type of on-line bullying or things of that nature. She's a young person that was playing basketball too, and I'm sure did not want any part of a negative situation that it turned out to be.

Q. Wondering, that first practice back, what was it like, but was there a player, like did Kiki or somebody say something that just really rallied the troops to kind of refocus and recenter on your goals of moving forward?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, I just, I came in and obviously -- look, I'm not, I don't, you know, I said, We've all had a lot of emotions, in the last whatever it was, 36 hours, we had the day off after the Mississippi State game and the win that sent us to the Sweet 16, so we've had a lot of emotions, but none of them are doubt, right. There's a lot of belief in our team, there's a lot of love, obviously for JuJu and that's ever present, we don't need to say that. But I think that the prevailing feeling is that we can still do something together, and that's what JuJu wants us to do. I think she's incredibly proud of the way they showed up for her and each other at the rest of that game, and will do so going forward. But it was really a group thing. I think Kiki was a huge presence on our team and breeds a lot of confidence, but Rayah as well, and TVO, like we have great leadership and I think the mentality has been gravitational to do something together and that's been the kind of prevailing feeling moving forward.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll be back with USC student-athletes.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the student-athletes, please.

Q. Talia, being the point guard for this offense that now doesn't have JuJu Watkins, what's the biggest adjustment just getting this offense moving?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think I'm really a

combo guard, so I think for me, like, I'm going to have to play the wing a lot more -- or get to play the wing a lot more. But I think it's just kind of business as usual. Obviously, we've lost a big piece, but we have a lot of reps playing with other lineups in practice, and so I think, obviously, we just rely on her for a lot of shot-making, play-making, so other people's roles are going to expand and just have higher volume. But I think we're confident in all of our abilities, so, yeah, I think just some different looks a little bit, different offense, but it's more of the same stuff that we've been doing all year.

Q. Talia, you've won a state championship in this building. You're a couple hours away from your hometown. Just how excited are you to be playing here once again? And back in the days at Tri Cities Prep and Chiawana, did you ever think you would be playing here at the Sweet 16 in the Spokane Arena?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Oh, I knew that was you. Yeah, it's super cool. I think, like you said, won a state championship on this floor. I think that was the last game I've played here. So, yeah, it's just crazy to be back. I think I've had a long journey these four years, so hopefully not my last games. But to kind of be towards the end of my career playing here, all my family's going to be able to come, some people that have never been able to come to my games before in my career. So it's a blessing. I'm super grateful to be here, to have all my family come support, and just be in the city that, you know, I didn't grow up in, but grew up close and was here all the time at the Warehouse, the Hub, whatever it is. So it feels like home and I'm super excited.

Q. Coach said you've had a lot of emotion the past week, but she said one of 'em is not doubt. Maybe, Avery, you could start with how do you overcome doubt and still accomplish your goals?

AVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think with the preparation we've done all year, we know how much work we've put in, so it just kind of falls back on that. Obviously losing JuJu was a super hard thing for our team and nobody wants to see any player of that caliber go down, especially JuJu with what she means for our team.

But like what T said, we got to do it for her at this point. We don't have doubt in anyone. We know people's roles are going to be changing and expanding, but we're built for this. We've been preparing for -- like, not this, but we've been preparing everyone in case or whatever might happen. So I think everyone's ready with the work they do on their own, the work they do with the coaches, for whatever moment they need to rise for.

So I think that, yeah, like she said, doubt's not even anywhere near our minds, but it's just about our next game and making sure we're ready for that moment.

Q. What has this year at USC been like for you? Speaking of adjusting. Like, you've -- like, your game has changed. You've learned a lot, I'm sure. What's gone into it?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think it's definitely been a big adjustment playing a different position and playing the 1 spot a lot more, and just playing with incredible talent around me. Definitely a different role than I've ever played. But it's been fun. I think I've learned a lot. I've grown in different areas. And I think just the challenges and struggles that I've gone through individually this year are going to help me going forward in life and in my career.

So just grateful for it and just going to see it all as a positive and take all those lessons into these next hopefully four games.

Q. Avery, this freshman class has obviously been big for USC. What has it meant to you that you and Kennedy and Kayleigh have been able to do this together and lean on each other? How does it feel to be part of a trio who have made this adjustment to college life together?

AVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think it's really cool. I think we're all really close. We have seven freshmen in this class, so all of us freshmen are really close, push each other on and off the court, but especially me, Kennedy, and Kayleigh, we're really close. We're all at McDonald's together. That's kind of where we all met, and then just since then, have been really close. Me and Kennedy are roommates back home.

So I think it's been really cool, and then with the opportunity that our upperclassmen, our teammates, are giving us, and our coaches, just to be able to play in games and get a ton of reps in practice, pushing each other. We have a lot of greatness around us, so there's a level of that that we have to rise to, and I think we're ready for those moments.

Q. Avery already addressed this, but for the other two, what have the emotions of the past week been like sort of processing the injury and trying to be there for JuJu in addition to moving forward, getting ready for this weekend?

MALIA SAMUELS: I think everybody has kind of reacted differently. Everybody has different relationships with Ju and everybody has -- I know for me personally, I have

gone through an ACL injury, so I feel for her, and I know what the journey is like, so obviously, my reaction is going to be different than obviously somebody else. But we have all gone through, like, sadness, just empathy. We've gone through it all.

But we also realize that Ju would want us to win and carrying her competitive spirit with us is the main thing that we need to focus on.

Q. Malia, building off of that, what was that recovery process like for you? And I guess what would you tell JuJu about what lies ahead and what to keep in mind as she's waiting to come back?

MALIA SAMUELS: Yeah, it was a long journey for me. I kind of got hurt at a weird time. It was like my junior going into my senior year AAU basketball, so I didn't play my entire senior year. And then obviously there's no games happening in the summer after I was fully recovered, so I didn't play for about a year and a half. So the journey is long, but I know Ju is mentally strong enough to go through whatever is ahead. And some days are better than others, the journey's not perfect, but I know she's strong enough to get through it.

Q. You guys are also somewhat close to home being from Seattle and Boise. Just, are you guys familiar with Spokane, have you played here before, and what's it like if you got family that are able to come out and to these games as well.

MALIA SAMUELS: Yeah, my family is coming out. They're actually going to fly because it's snowing on the pass. But I've played in Hoopfest here, I've played in like the middle school state championships at the Convention Center. Like, I've been here for a few tournaments, so it's fun to be back and fun to be close to home.

EVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I have a lot of family that are coming out to this game, friends and family, some old coaches. I played a lot of club basketball here, high school basketball tournaments, so it's cool to be back here with a familiar town and area, so, yeah.

Q. For all of you, your last game sort of the experience playing so well, playing in front of the crowd that it was, what does that do for you guys?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: I think like we talked about earlier when Ju went down and every moment since then I don't think there has been any doubt. So I think regardless of what was going on we had a lot of confidence in ourselves. But then to come out and finish the game like that and score 90-something points and just have a

statement win, I think it just adds even more confidence and shows that we can do it, we have done it. So, obviously it's not going to be easy, and it's just going to get harder and harder every round, but we've proven to be able to and we have a lot of great players, great talent on this team. And like Coach said after the game, that was one of the best games we've played all year, and it was super fun. Even we talked about it, it was one of the funnest games, the crowd was amazing, we felt super connected and so, yeah, I think it's just proven to ourselves that we can play like that regardless of the circumstances. And then just adding the fuel to the fire of wanting to do it for Ju, so we're very confident going forward.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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