

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

Kennedy Smith

Avery Howell

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

USC - 67, Kansas State - 61

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

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First, I want to give a ton of credit to Kansas State who had an incredible season, and we know the injury that they dealt with Lee all year, and they were, I thought, a top 10 team when she was healthy and played like it tonight. I'm a big fan of Sundell. I think she should be in somebody's WNBA camp for sure, if not drafted. And I thought they gave us everything that we could handle.

And I'm really proud of our team's fight and togetherness and finding a way to win. It's not supposed to be easy and it wasn't easy. Specifically, I think, you know, the team effort comes in the way of Rayah and Clarice as a tandem guarding Lee, who is such a tough matchup, which then allowed to us guard the three-point line more easily.

I thought our perimeter defense was terrific, and that includes Kiki who was running around on shooters, as well as our point of attack people who turned 'em over. I thought they tried as hard as they could to make it hard on our interior, and I thought Kiki and Rayah and C did their jobs and worked, and I knew they were going to knock down some shots.

Then what can I say about our freshmen class? They're winners above everything else. I got a text here that said Kennedy effing Smith, and I was, like, can I say that in the



media? And there was a time when she just hit a shot, and I was like -- something I can't say here.

They're just tough. They're incredibly tough, and they are winners. And that's what I told 'em before the game, and they earned every bit of it, and I'm just proud to be playing in the Elite Eight and proud of our group that they get to experience this.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Kennedy, USC uses this mantra, Fight on. It's been a very long time since you guys have played a game without JuJu. What did you guys collectively learn about yourselves that you can carry over to Monday night?

KENNEDY SMITH: Just playing together, having a sense of togetherness, I think that's something we emphasized even coming in in the summer. Our chemistry on and off the court has been great even coming in from the summer. So just kind of navigating from there. I think everybody on this team has value and brings something to the table, so I think everybody stepped up today.

Q. Lindsay talked all week about not letting doubt creep in or doubt never being a part of this. How did it feel on the court tonight, especially as you guys are going back and forth, they take a lead at certain points? How did you feel that, that this team kind of never doubted itself down the stretch?

KENNEDY SMITH: It felt good. I never had any doubt on this team. I think everybody had still had the common goal of winning a National Championship, so just coming in and playing with heart, grit, and fight from beginning to the end and just kind of carrying that over.

AVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think it falls back on our preparation that we've done all season. I think that the experiences we're getting through practice and the game situations we've been in, I think that it just carries over to these moments, and I think that we're so deep on this team and everyone plays such a valuable role, that if someone's not hitting, we have someone else to rely on. I think it falls



back to the preparation and the work we've been doing all season.

Q. You guys only had nine turnovers today and I imagine you were running some lineups that you really haven't run all that much, so what do you attribute your ability to just take care of the ball so well today?

KENNEDY SMITH: I think having trust in our point guards. I mean, obviously, TVO, she's a vet, and then Kayleigh Heckel coming in, just having trust in them and kind of picking them up if we do have a turnover and whatnot. But just kind of focusing on the main goal.

AVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think it's just, like, the composure that we've been working with all season. We've emphasized a lot on not turning the ball over, so even with the shift in lineups and things we had to go through the past week, I think it just falls back on how much emphasis we've had on being strong with the ball, having composure, especially when the game's back and forth, back and forth with a really good team. I think it's just falling back on our habits and staying level-headed.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I want to add one thing to that. We also have bigs that really handle the ball well. Like, Rayah has three assists and one turnover, and we can put the ball in their hands quite a bit. So I just think the balance of it, everyone's ball security was really good.

Q. Y'all were wearing shirts with JuJu's face on 'em when you came to the game, and you had the little thing at the bench. How do you juggle that mindset of wanting to kind of keep her here with you but not letting yourselves get overwhelmed with not having her here with you?

KENNEDY SMITH: Like I mentioned earlier, we still have the common goal of obviously winning a National Championship, so with Ju going down obviously it was a bit of adversity that we had to face, but just having her in our presence. We talked to her before the game. She was still rooting us on, things of that nature, so just keeping her in our hearts and minds and playing for her as well as for each other.

AVERY HOWELL: I think it's just finding a balance of the role that she has played for this entire program since she's been here, but it's, like, we have her in our thoughts and we're supporting her from here and we're taking her competitive nature onto the court with us every single time we step there, and we know that she's back home supporting us, having a watch party, doing everything she can to give us that good JuJu, you could say (laughing), so yeah.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: (No microphone.) (Laughing.)

Q. Avery, I was talking to Beth Burns yesterday and she said that Kennedy -- in all her 40 years of coaching, Kennedy is the freshman that has the highest defensive IQ she's ever coached. What's it like for you kind of -- obviously you guys know each other really well. What's it like for you watching her do her thing on the defensive end and create those turnovers?

AVERY HOWELL: I think it's a lot of fun, and I think it just fuels our whole team. I see Kennedy up clapping in someone's face and then everyone else feeds off that dog mindset and mentality. So I think it's a really good start for our defense, especially when she's guarding somebody from the opposite free-throw line. It gets everyone energized, our bench gets loud, our coaches are fired up. I just think it fuels the whole team, so it's a lot of fun to play with.

Q. Obviously bigger ones than this, but for both of you and maybe start with Kennedy, was a moment like this, a tight game back and forth in the Sweet 16, what you envisioned or maybe even talked about when you were thinking about and committing to USC?

KENNEDY SMITH: Can you repeat the question? I'm sorry.

Q. Was a moment like this what you were thinking about or even talking about when you committed to USC and were going through that process?

KENNEDY SMITH: For sure. Down the line, even watching last year from last year's team, they made it to the Elite Eight, and just their games are back and forth. The competitive, like, spirit and energy was there. So I knew coming in we were going to have some tough games. Even in our pre-season, we played UConn already. So been back and forth from there, and I think we just stayed level-headed and grounded, so I'm ready for the moment. Even in high school, just the balance with that, I think I was prepared to be in the position I am right now.

AVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think there's a level of excellence that's needed at this program, starting from our coaching staff's expectations to the greatness that's been here in the past. So I think coming here we knew that there was going to be that level that we had to get to, and our coaches have let us grow into those roles and we've had a lot of people help us, with the upperclassmen and the coaches -- coaching staff just helping us.

But I think that this is definitely a moment that everyone wants to be a part of and us freshmen, I feel especially have been able to be in these situations because of our coaching staff letting us play in games and letting us get those reps, and then obviously, we have a lot of leaders to look up to on this team, so I think that's really important.

Q. Either of you, UConn is next. Obviously, you've played them this year, but you weren't here for the Elite Eight last year. What's your thoughts going into that one?

EVERY HOWELL: They're a great team, so it's going to be a tough game, but I think we're going to enjoy this one right now, but then it's back to business. We're going to get a good scout, we're going to get a good game plan, and get back to work tomorrow. So I think that it's just a matter of focusing on what we need to do to be the best we can be on Monday.

Q. Avery, you obviously had 18 points, a great game offensively, but you stepped into JuJu's role defensively almost during this game with four steals and eight rebounds. Was that an emphasis during practice in the last few days?

EVERY HOWELL: I don't think I'm necessarily trying to like do exactly what she does because I don't think anyone can really replicate what she does for our team, but I think I'm trying to take her competitive mindset, and I feel like she's everywhere on the court when she's -- when she was with us, so I'm trying to kind of fill in at least that competitive mindset, that dog mentality that, again, I think she has.

So I'm trying to pick up some of those rebounds, help out our bigs when they're boxing out somebody huge and, like, super big for the other team. So I think that I'm trying to fill in a little bit of that role, but again, I don't really think Ju's presence can really be completely filled in, just because she's such an amazing player.

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

Q. I remember you telling me back at Big Ten media day how with a lot of incoming freshmen you had this year that despite heightened expectations, that they were going to help kind of keep you grounded a bit. Was this kind of what you envisioned, knowing that some of them were going to have to play key roles this year? Like, what can you say about the maturity that they have shown?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, just so you guys know, there's seven of them. They're all kind of like that when

they're with each other, so it's been a fun year with that.

But we recruited this group to play. And I remember getting on a Zoom with the families, seven players and their families, heading into -- before they came over the summer, and I said, Look, we went to the Elite Eight. Now the bar's been raised, and the bar's been raised for our returners, and the bar's been raised for the expectations of the people coming in, and the bar's raised with whoever we go and add in the portal, and we've never shied away from these being the goals.

Obviously, some of the freshmen have played more than others in game minutes, but we've had a belief in what the team can do, and I just think above all else, we recruited winners. I do think these guys came because they were attracted to this idea of a competitive mindset and playing with other really good players with the ultimate goal of being in big-time games that are for -- with championships on the line.

Q. You said yesterday that ever since JuJu went down, the goal was the same, but the path would be different. Are you allowing yourself to -- this is a big moment to win this. Do you allow yourself that tonight or is your mindset already on UConn?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think it's a little bit of both. I'm really proud of this team. I think any Sweet 16 win when you get to the Elite Eight, whether you're a 1 seed, whether you have your entire team or not, is a big deal. These are really competitive games. And so I'm proud of this game and the way we won it, and then we'll obviously shift very quickly to try and put together the best game plan to try to win a game on Monday night.

Q. You and the players can say anything you want about moving forward and all that, but it's different when it comes to getting and doing it on the court. How pleased were you to see that kind of response from them, especially from your younger players, that they just kept moving forward?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, really surprised -- or really pleased but not surprised. I knew we would come out and compete. I do think we have had this really good balance. I read something that Coach Geno had said where back several years ago when Shea Ralph got hurt, I think late in the season, prior to it, it was so devastating to the team, it was almost like someone had passed away, and they had a hard time kind of functioning.

I think our players -- I've been really proud of them. There's so much love for JuJu in our program, and everyone values her and knows nobody's like her, and

we've kind of kept her close. But I don't think we've ever had this feeling of now oh, no, all of our goals are gone, and neither has JuJu.

So I think that we felt going into this game, like, this is a game we have to attack and prepare for with the intent to win. We knew it wouldn't be easy, but I thought when it got hard out there -- and Kansas State is a really good team who poses a lot of problems, I thought you saw the team really stick together and compete, just from a technical standpoint, but we had to find different ways. They really tried to take away the paint and take away Kiki, and other people had to respond, and I thought we did enough. I thought we did enough on the defensive end and made enough shots, and I just think that's been the mindset the entire time.

Q. Last year and maybe this year some, you mentioned that Rayah was one of the first players to really take a chance at coming to USC of this group and tonight she led you guys in rebounds, blocks, and assist, I believe. Just what has she meant to this program, particularly the way that she's continued to have different roles year after year and not be concerned with whether or not she's the big player all the time?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, she's been an incredible leader. So she had committed to USC and when I got the job, she was my first phone call. I literally remember the conversation sitting in our kitchen in Cleveland, and she said, Coach, I'm in. I'm in with you. And then really she and Clarice staying all four years. I remember we beat Arizona their freshman year when I think Arizona was No. 2 in the country, and I grabbed those two and said, Hey, like, enjoy this. At some point we are going to be that team that other people are trying to beat. And she tells it funnier than I do. She's like, This lady's crazy.

But here they are, and I have so much -- I'm just so proud of them. Rayah has evolved as a leader, she's evolved as a playmaker or whatever role is needed, and I thought she was terrific tonight, as was Clarice, and you can throw two different bodies that lead that way and it's a real part of what we do defensively.

Q. Obviously there's the emotional adjustment not having JuJu, but on the court, where were the biggest adjustments that you guys had to make, especially when they take Kiki away early, how much of a strain did that put on your initial plans?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, we put in a couple new things this week, but I didn't retool the whole offense. It was more go deeper in the bag of what options are we

going to get out of our looks. Obviously, JuJu is such an incredible shotmaker, playmaker, that you don't often have to get to the back end of something because she can just create.

So I thought we did a real good job of, we said it's going to be this is the first look and if they try and take this away, this is the second look, and, hey, this is the third look, and if we get to the fourth look, no one's ever seen it, least of all me, because we haven't had to get there at times this year because we've had such a high-powered offense early in transition.

So I was really proud of the fact that K-State had a good game plan and tried to take things away. We didn't get some of our easy stuff and we had to work to get to what we wanted, and I thought there were some really important shot-making.

I thought the way Kiki hung with it and worked her tail off on the defensive end and the offensive end, I knew she'd break through and hit a couple of those jumpers. I thought Rayah hit a couple big jumpers to start the second half to get us going. And then when that attention comes to them, the way that they moved it, and our guard made shots and made some big plays. I thought Avery and Kennedy were both incredible, Heckel was really, really good.

But it was really a team kind of effort that we needed because you take away just the singular kind of offensive, you know, talent that JuJu is where a lot of things look easier than what they are sometimes.

Q. TVO sat out the last 7:45 of the game. Is there a reason behind that? Was it just the flow of the game and how the guard play was happening?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, you got to make decisions. We believe in everybody, but I thought that group that was on the floor was in such a rhythm. I mean, even Rayah sat a little bit because Clarice -- Clarice was in a rhythm defensively, and so we just can kind of rode with that group and obviously when -- situations where they're going to foul or something, we're going to go back with different people.

But we have trust in everybody, but we just kind of rode at that moment down the stretch with that group that was in there. I think we barely subbed at all down the stretch, just because I thought we were in a defensive rhythm, and getting stops was critical. And then we just rolled with who was in the game and didn't want to make any changes at that point. But she's ready to go. I thought she gave really good minutes. She hit a huge pullup jumper in the second half as well. And, yeah, I mean, we're deep enough that there could be different people at different times.

Q. There were different philosophies on building rosters in the modern game, and Coach sat up there last night and said, We don't want to get too young. We want to add transfers. So what made you believe in taking such a large freshmen class? And then did you sort of -- did anyone come to you directly with that sort of skepticism on the idea?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think that -- which Coach said it? I'm curious.

Q. Coach Yo.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Oh, yeah. I mean, everyone's kind of figuring it all out. Is seven really atypical? Yes. I think the way that it worked out with who committed when, and we were very specific about not just recruiting everybody that has a high ranking or something, just finding the pieces that fit. But the way that the timing of it worked out we just felt like everyone fit us in that class. And I think it's a balance of both, right, like we hit an echelon, you know, once we got JuJu and once we started to put together some winning things, that we were able to get some really top freshmen that we do think are just, could step in and play right away, and as they develop could also have us continue to be one of the best programs in the country. And then we went into the portal last year and felt like we didn't need to rebuild, but we could add pieces that would help us, like we said, raise the standard. And the only standard after the Elite Eight is Final Fours and national championships. So the way that that worked out, you know, was how it worked out. I don't think it's going to be something that we go in every year saying how do we get three, four, five, six freshmen, I just, I don't think that's realistic. But we're going to do our best to develop the ones we have, bring in the right pieces. And roster construction I think becomes a huge part of what we do, and I'll try to be really thoughtful about that as we go forward each year of what's the right fit for our group each year.

Q. You guys mentioned that you heard from Ju before the game, what did she have to say?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, just I was just FaceTiming with her after in the locker room. She just, she hit me and just said how proud she was, before this game even, of the coaching staff, of the players, of everything that we are. And then right after, it was hard to hear in the locker room, but there were a lot of smiles, and my daughter was blowing kisses to her and said, JuJu's not hurt? And I said, No, she's still hurt, but she's happy today and with us. So just trying to keep her, like they said, her spirit with us. She's just such an incredible young person and I think the

way the team has responded says a lot about them, but also a lot about her and the true amount of chemistry that they have with each other.

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