

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

**Kansas State Wildcats**

**Jeff Mittie**

**Ayoka Lee**

**Serena Sundell**

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.

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, hard-fought game. Disappointed that the outcome, we just came up short in some areas down the stretch. But it was a hard-fought game, physical the entire 40 minutes, and we just come up on the short end. Congrats to USC. Obviously they had to fight through some things, and I thought they made a couple more plays than we did.

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

**Q. Serena, Lindsay was just in here, and she said that she would love to see you on the WNBA roster. Maybe think back to maybe your freshman year, maybe when you committed to K-State, and just how much you have evolved until now to now being scouted on a professional level and what your career has been like at K-State**

SERENA SUNDELL: Yeah, that's a huge compliment. I would just credit my coaching staff and teammates for helping me grow over the last four years. I'm a much better player, and I have a lot more confidence than the 18-year-old I was when I first stepped on campus. So just a credit to the people around me and, yeah, I'm grateful to be a Wildcat.



**Q. Ayoka, obviously this loss is still fresh, but as you look back through your career and the ups and downs, to be able to play in the Sweet 16 and in some degree leave the program better than you found it, what does that mean to you?**

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, it means a lot. To have a coach that has just continued to believe in me through everything I've been through and to have teammates like Serena who have just been game-changers from the minute they stepped on campus. Yeah, I don't think -- like, not everyone gets to have a college career like that, so extremely grateful, yeah.

**Q. For both players, there's been a lot of love on Twitter already for the team and just for what your senior class achieved. Do you have any thoughts on just what this senior class achieved at K-State state?**

SERENA SUNDELL: I'm just proud of this group. I guess we had big goals coming into the season, so obviously proud to get to where we did. It stings right now. The locker room was hard. We wanted to extend the season as long as we could, but I know we're going to look back and be really proud of what we've done for this program. So just proud of our group.

AYOKA LEE: Yeah, I think just really proud. Yeah, I think we accomplished a lot this season, so, yeah, that's something to definitely be proud of.

**Q. Serena, I know that we talked so much about this senior class, but when you guys leave, there's going to have to be new players who step up and lead this program. For those players who are going to have to take that next step and -- not maybe replace you guys, but continue to carry the tradition and the legacy that you guys leave, what's your message to those players?**

SERENA SUNDELL: I think just be confident. They have got a lot of experience under their belts already. We saw, like, girls like Zyanna Walker step up tonight in really big moments. So, yeah, we'll just pass the torch to them, but I

think it will be an easy transition. Don't be afraid to lead, don't be afraid to continue to push yourself, and just be confident.

**Q. Ayoka, I know it's still fresh and you mentioned it a little bit on ESPN, but do you have an idea of what the future of your basketball career looks like?**

AYOKA LEE: That's a tomorrow question.

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

**Q. Just like to get your thoughts on how special this senior class and the players that gave it all today.**

JEFF MITTIE: Oh, well, these two have -- I think you can tell just how well they have represented Kansas State and just how fond their memories are of representing Kansas State, so, you know, that means a lot. It means a lot to our coaching staff, it means a lot to our fans, I think it means a lot to our Kansas State community, Manhattan, all of the above.

The senior class, you know, this is a large senior class for us, and with today's athletics, not everybody gets there the same way, although this group has been with us a long time. It's hard right now. We didn't want this to end for a lot of reasons, you know. You get to this point, you're disappointed in the outcome, but you wanted to have one more film session, one more practice, one more walkthrough, one more -- you know, and how long could you extend it. And when it ends, it ends like that (indicating.)

So, yeah, I'm proud of this senior group. I think they have done some good things. Disappointed with the outcome tonight. But, you know, at some point -- I told 'em in the locker room, at some point your tears will be, hopefully, happy tears that you start to remember the things that you -- the time you spent with your coaches, the wins, the bus trips, the plane trips, all the stuff.

**Q. I know you might have a better answer in the future, but where does Serena, Ayoka, and Jaelyn leave this program from when they first joined to now?**

JEFF MITTIE: Yeah, well, they're a team that went somewhere that hadn't been done in 23 years. The last two years in particular -- I don't even know what -- what are we, 28 this year? 27? Whatever the number is. I think it's one of the top two-year numbers. So I mean, this is where we want to be. This group last year, we returned about 80 percent, and they wanted to get past the point of last year, and this is a step towards that.

But I think it goes deeper than just the wins and losses. Those are things that we obviously want to do, but people -- as a coach, you know, boy, they're going to be hard to replace just as people and just as just quality people across the board. Whatever I asked 'em to do, whatever I needed them to do, whether it be, you know, they were glad to do it. Whether it be community outreach, whether it be talk to their teammates about something, whatever, whatever. They're rare. They're rare. They're rare people.

**Q. If I told you before the game that Kiki Iriafen was going to shoot 3-13 and have seven points, I imagine you would have felt pretty good about your chances. How did that game plan work and what did it see about their freshmen that they were able to step up and pull this off anyway?**

JEFF MITTIE: I think that's the sting for us right now. There were a lot of things we did well that we came in -- because you're talking about one of the top offensive rebounders in the country that only gets one offensive rebound, it was a big one too, down the stretch. But we did a great job on her. Our players had a great awareness. But credit to their freshmen, because this is a big stage and they're the No. 1 recruiting class in the country for a reason, and I thought they stepped up. Smith got 'em off to a great start, 23, Howell was fantastic, so it says a lot about the depth of their roster.

**Q. I know it was a battle out there, but did you feel like there were any key differences that ultimately played a deciding factor in this game?**

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I thought -- we didn't play with the physicality well enough. The third quarter hurt us because we either made shots -- we shoot over 60 percent, but we only get eight shots. Turnovers hurt us. They get 15 shots in the quarter. That's a big number to overcome. I thought the physicality, I thought the -- we had trouble with getting movement in our offense and we talked about we needed to win the middle of the floor, and in that stretch I thought that they won the middle of the floor. So, from that standpoint that's the part that I think from a basketball perspective they won the middle of the floor more than we did tonight.

**Q. The underclassmen, players like Zyanna Walker and Taryn Sides have played key roles for you throughout the year, what does this experience do for them as they continue to progress in their careers and what do you hope they learned from a senior class that they have been around now for a few years?**

JEFF MITTIE: Well, I mean, it depends on what they do



with it. I mean, everybody always asks that question as if there's a guarantee that next year's better than this year just because you're older. No, there's not. If you use it to get better, then it's a really good experience and it's worthwhile. Those two, what I will say about those two, is that they put the time in the gym. Out of all of our players, Zyanna Walker and Taryn Sides are in the gym more often than anybody. If I go up to the office at nine o'clock on a Sunday night to grab something and I hear the music, I'm going to bet on one of those two are in the gym. This experience will be valuable for 'em, if they use it in the right way, and I'm confident that they will.

**Q. You mentioned the third quarter, what does it say about the team that even in that third quarter they battled and battled. Serena diving there at the end, what does that say about the team?**

JEFF MITTIE: We wanted this one, there's no doubt we wanted this one. We wanted this one bad. We thought it was right there, and I think it was right there. We're a shot away from flipping it, it was kind of that game. But, I mean, you're playing to go to the Elite Eight, you better be diving on the floor. I mean, you better be making those plays, or you're not advancing. And even if you are doing those things, as we know, we sit here today not advancing. But that doesn't surprise me. I would have been more surprised if she didn't.

**Q. You got a big hug from Yoky there. She was going on about it takes a lot to have a coach that has trust in her. Why is it that you entrusted in her even more so than just the senior class where she's a super, super senior?**

JEFF MITTIE: Oh, boy, if you get to know Yoky at all, she is -- it's kind of funny that she thanks me for trusting her. She's pretty easy to trust. It's not hard. The kid just, I mean, my gosh, out of all of the young people in our athletic department, she's right up there with the very best of the very best. So I chuckle when she says things like that, because it's pretty easy to trust somebody that always does the right thing and wants to do the right thing and thinks about others before themselves. I mean, that's pretty easy for me.

But I think for her, because she's been through so much, her and I have spent a lot of times in those moments that you guys don't get to see. Doctor's offices, trainers, weight room in kind of the lonely hours. And when you spend time with players in those situations or -- you know, you see 'em at the best moments of their life and you see 'em at the toughest moments of their lives. So we have been through all of those together in her time.

**Q. If this is the last game of Yoky's basketball career, just what does it say about her that she does have plans and stuff in place that she can move on?**

JEFF MITTIE: Well, you know, she -- you know, I think everybody knows, but when she got hurt January 19th there was a decision to be made. Because with all the stuff she's been through she could have said, Hey, I've given it everything I've got, and nobody would have thought twice about it. She made that decision to have a procedure done so that she could come back. She comes back, and then we have another problem with the other foot. And at that point nobody would have said boo about if she would have said, you know, Hey, I've given everything I've got. And she decides to have another one to be in these moments. And I think it's just simply because she loves her teammates, she loves her school, she loves Manhattan. And she wanted this, it hadn't happened in her career, and she was going to do everything she could. So I don't know what the future holds for her. She has been an amazing person in that she has always wanted to be where her feet are and not think too far ahead. She's got a unique ability to do that. Even though she's a planner, and in her professional career she's already, she's already a family therapist and already seeing clients, and she can see down the road. But she also knows how important it is to be in the moment. And so, you know, her and I will have a discussion, and we had a few, but awhile back. And that's what she told me, Let's get to when the season ends and we'll have one and she will make a decision.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports....