

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Final - UConn vs USC

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

**USC Trojans**

**Lindsay Gottlieb**

**Kayleigh Heckel**

**Kiki Iriafen**

**Rayah Marshall**

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead -- would you like to make an opening statement or take questions?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Sure. Just really excited to have a walkthrough today, a practice today, a film session, all the things that we love to do with one another. Grateful to still be playing. We know we have a big task ahead, but our players are excited and ready for a good prep day today and then a great game tomorrow night.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Does having a great player on your team around every day, practice, games, does that help you prepare for another team who has a great player?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the level of talent we have in our gym every day has raised everyone's level. As they say, iron sharpens iron. So I think that the atmosphere in our gym gets us ready for big games. I think the fact that we've also played against a lot of great players all year, the UConn players included in that game, but also other really great teams across the Big Ten, just gets you ready for a moment like this.

**Q. You talked a bit about Clarice's defense yesterday, but just emphasizing that Ayoka Lee had 12 points and eight of them were when she was not in the game. Can you talk a little bit about her defense and just the season and also just you mentioned her history with the program, so talk a little bit about that and then how you're maybe thinking of using her tomorrow and what**



impact she could have in the game tomorrow.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I think in the encyclopedia of basketball, if there was a definition of role player and someone who plays their role to a T, it's Clarice Akunwafo. I think it's probably well known she's going to med school, she wants to go to med school, she studies for the MCATs, probably right now in the locker room during the open media locker room.

But I think if she wanted to be in the WNBA, she could be on somebody's roster for the way that she does her job so exceptionally well. She's an incredible athlete. She really moves well, powerful athlete, understands defense and buys into that, and I think it allows us to be who we are. I think it allows our guards to do what they do. I think the tandem of she and Rayah presents maybe the most formidable defensive front court in the country, and we're going to use her like we would in any game against the opponent's bigs.

**Q. You've had to prepare for Paige before. What is it about her that makes her so difficult to defend and how much does that -- I know you don't have JuJu, but how much does it help to have someone like Kennedy who is so good at on-ball defense when you have to try to shut down a player like that?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, Paige has been an incredible player for years now. She does it efficiently. It's her ability to score, her ability to pass and involve others to move without the basketball, and I think what we're seeing a little differently now, and I think Geno maybe even said it yesterday, it's an urgency, right? Not that she's not been urgent before, but you see it on her face. Like, this is -- there's no more waiting. It can't be, okay, next time or next time. It's right now. And so I think you're seeing the urgency of a senior trying to achieve her goals and she's really good.

But also, UConn's offense is really good, so it's hard to focus only on one player. I do think we'll put together a game plan that tries to limit Paige and tries to limit their offense the best that we can. And the fact that we have Kennedy Smith is always a bonus to our defense. I think

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we have multiple defenders. It's not going to take one person. It's going to take a lot of people to play against, you know, a player that obviously in this tournament is playing as well as anyone or maybe anyone ever has, and that game last night was certainly something.

**Q. You've coached a lot of different rosters, but this one is unique with the veteran leadership you have, the star power of JuJu and then seven freshmen. Avery and Kennedy were up here yesterday, like, giddy and delightful. I'm curious how coaching this group of players specifically has either changed or challenged you as a coach this season?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, this has been an incredibly rewarding season in a lot of ways, and not the least of which is presented new challenges. I think the new challenges started with the raised expectations and the raised standards and, again, those are problems I think every coach in America would want, but integrating returners, star power, key transfers that were -- came from really successful programs, and then integrating freshmen.

I think I've said this before. Good teams are not just made by slapping talent on a piece of paper. You see that obviously in professional sports all the time. It takes chemistry and synergy off the court, which I thought we had immediately, and then it takes synergy and chemistry on the court, and I think we had to work for that, and that was a process that I found really rewarding. And we're still evolving now, obviously, when you take JuJu out of the mix and how do we get the best out of these players. But I think it has been really fun, it has been really different than any other year that I've had, and it's been challenging in a good way, and I think I said all year that our growth trajectory should maybe be steeper than any other of the top teams because we have all this newness, and I think our players really bought into that, and I think we have come a really long way, and that's something that we're proud of.

**Q. When you guys played USC -- or UConn earlier this year, Kiki had a really good game and last night she was talking about just how hard it is now that she's the focal point of a lot of defenses without JuJu, that she's going to be seeing more double teams and stuff. How are you talking to her heading into this game and how important do you think her brushing off last night's game and getting locked in for UConn is going to be important for setting that tone and setting that standard?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, to tie that in with the other question, we've had to reinvent ourselves or we've had to grow throughout the course of the year, so I don't think it's

something brand-new, but I do think -- I had and conversation with Kiki last night, pulled some clips we'll watch again this morning, trying to find -- get her as comfortable as possible with what's coming. People are doing all kinds of different things to try and defend her.

But I think our success will come from five players finding the best shot, and we know we have a weapon in Kiki. She's one of the best players in the country, and we want to get her to her spots. We want to get her there early and often and keep going to those spots. But at the same time if they throw two and three people at her, there's other players on the court that obviously are highly capable and the ball's got to move to whatever the best shot is.

So I think it's continuing to watch film and, as we say, try to give them the answers before the exam the best that we can and also just empowering her to do what she does on the court, which sometimes isn't scoutable, her motor and her athleticism. So just trying to get everyone in their best possible spot to be able to attack the goals in front of us and take what the defense gives us.

**Q. I'm sure preparing to play you UConn seeing Paige drop 40 was not great, but knowing what she has gone through and now obviously what JuJu's going to have to go through, how encouraging was it to see she's gone through this and is back and not only back, but better than she was before the injury?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, regardless of who our opponent is on Monday night, I've always had a ton of respect for Paige. I think I sat up here -- or wherever we were, Portland, last year, and said as sad as we are for us, it's hard not to value what the other team is doing. I've always thought that.

I said this the other day too. Super appreciative of Geno and how he handles his role and platform in this sport and was one of the first to reach out to me when JuJu got hurt, and then I saw that Paige has reached out to JuJu. I just think it shows the quality of human beings that we have in our sport.

And yes, I do think it will be a source of inspiration for JuJu to see someone like Paige literally go through a similar thing at about the same point in their career and come out the other side. Now obviously, we're hoping that Monday night is not the showcase for that. We're going to try and, you know, limit her to less than 40, certainly, but I think JuJu can see in realtime somebody that is thriving post-knee injury.

**Q. As you're putting together your defensive game plan for Paige and the pick-and-roll, how important is**



**the mobility of your post players? Because we saw last night what happens if you have to keep them back in the paint.**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's important (smiling).

**Q. We heard that JuJu FaceTimed the team yesterday after the game. I know you guys wish obviously she was here, but what was that moment like at least to see her excitement and to share that moment with her?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, it's just -- it's hard to put into words, right? Like, we're all just kind of going through these un-navigated or uncharted territories, and we said the whole time it's about the belief and the confidence and the competitive spirit of this group and at the same time keeping her with us. And it was the team decision and idea to wear the shirts coming out. I didn't even know the Funko Pop! was going to be on the bench, and then I saw the clips of that, and I'm like, okay, that was crazy and so fun and funny. And that's the best Funko Pop! of all time. Have you seen, like, the bun is perfect, the whole thing.

But just our team's ability. This is the stuff that's authentic and you can't make it up. I didn't say, Hey, let's all FaceTime JuJu now. They just -- it feels right, right? Like, you know, we want to keep her with us in every way that we can, and we know we have to face the 40 minutes kind of without her on the court, so that connectivity is there and that's not stuff you can fake, it's not stuff you can make up, and we're just navigating it the best that we know how and leading with our kind of authentic feelings and that is just how connected this group is.

**Q. When you think about the trajectory of this freshman class, I'm sure you could take each of them individually, but what stands out about how they have just been able to mature over the course of season inclusive of yesterday?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, our belief was there with them from the start. We knew that our freshmen class would have to contribute for us to achieve the goals that we were looking to achieve this year. Like, that was written into the plan. I didn't know exactly what it would look like. You don't put in your head who is it going to be, what is their role going to be exactly. They earn that. But we knew it was going to be -- part of our identity was going to be freshmen contributors. And we believed in them all year.

And remember, we've had what we consider kind of one-and-done-type championship games for a very long time because we knew we were in a battle with UCLA for

the Big Ten regular season championship. Like, that mattered to us, right? And so you couldn't drop a game along the way and that we had to beat them in those games, so they hit big shots and played in big moments throughout.

So I think the NCAA tournament's a bigger stage and now we don't have JuJu, but I don't think they're in situations that are completely foreign and their growth throughout the course of the year has gotten them ready for these spots.

**Q. It's a little bit different, but Clippers Coach Ty Lu talks about the post-season as his happy place. And I wonder for you, do you, like how do you view this post-season, sort of the game planning and the tight schedule for great teams with challenges unforeseen, etcetera.**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Well, in the NBA, you play so many games and so long, I feel like when people get to the post-season they're like, Here we are, you know. And so I can understand his perspective on that. But for us it's a balance of both. Like, the journey of the regular season really is, it's the magic of it, right, like it's enjoying that grind of it, it's about 30 games. But yes, then you work all that way to get to this stage. And you're at this stage. And it is not lost on us that only eight teams are still here. Coach B says, there's only eight buses now pulling in and out of things that we get to do, a walk through, a shoot around, a what have you. We really embrace that. And then moments on the court are just, they're unforgettable. They're the ones that I think people make sort of the memories of the women's basketball season going forward. And so obviously we're excited to be here and to make our own magic with each possession and with each game that we're able to play.

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

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the USC student-athletes.

**Q. When was it that Kennedy really first impressed you as a defender?**

KIKI IRIAFEN: I would say Kennedy's first day with the team. She's just been tenacious on defense, and I feel like that's something that has really helped our team, and in games when she was out for the season, it really hurt us. So we're happy that she's back and she's at her A game right now, but I would say honestly from the moment that she set foot on campus, summer workouts, like, she had

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that intensity and that fire on defense and I feel like it's just trickled down with everybody else.

RAYAH MARSHALL: Yeah, for me, same. Like, since the first day, like, whenever we're scrimmaging in practice, and I'm not on her team, I know it's serious. And also, she's a competitor, she's in your face, she's clapping her hands. So it's nonstop where I don't like playing against her.

**Q. Kayleigh, Lindsay was saying that the JuJu tributes that you guys did yesterday were player-driven, that it was your guys' idea to wear the T-shirts, and she didn't know that the Funko Pop! was even on the bench. So could you tell me what went into your thoughts about that and who actually has control of the Funko Pop!.**

KAYLEIGH HECKEL: Yeah, I think the Funko Pop! was Rian's idea, so I think she brought that. But I think we just really wanted to make everything as normal as possible. She's been with us all season, so we just wanted to make it seem like she was here. And she was watching us, supporting us at home, having a watch party with her family, so I think that it just helped us make everything a lot more normal.

**Q. Kiki, was there anything in particular that they were able to do last night on defense that was bothering you or do you think it was just one of those nights? Are you going to change your approach for UConn? Because you guys are learning on the fly, you have not played without Ju really at all.**

KIKI IRIAFEN: Yeah, I think K-State did a great job of doubling and trying to limit our paint points, so I'm sure teams are going to continue to do that. We'll probably see that on Monday. For me, it's watching film, seeing where I'm getting the ball and how can I impact my teammates, if I need to be more of a facilitator for the next game.

But I think we're going to see that a lot more, but I think you saw it last game. A lot of our guards are more than capable of taking over and impacting the game and giving us production. So I think that's something I've been saying all season long, is, like, 1 through 15, we have so much talent. Nobody believed me, but I think you're seeing it now.

**Q. When you played in Connecticut earlier this season, you had a really good game. How much does that make you have the confidence that you can bounce back from last night? And then also, what can you take away from that as a whole collective team, knowing that you have already beat them once this season?**

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think my confidence is not shaken. It's one game and it's a new day. We have a new day to fight. I think as a team beating UConn already gives us a lot of confidence, but we're not cocky. We understand that they're a great team. They're kind of playing at their best right now, and we're losing a huge piece. But I think for us, when there's a will, there's a way. We'll have a great game plan to guard them. And I think we really pride ourselves on our defense, and that's something we've been great at. So I think it will be a great game for us, but we're definitely coming with a lot of confidence.

**Q. Rayah, Lindsay was in here talking about how important Clarice's role is and how well she plays it. What do you see from her that makes her defense so effective, and what does it mean to you that the two of you have been able to grow here over the last couple of years together?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: So, Clarice is just really good at what she does. She's a force. And, honestly, her coming off the bench is I feel like another reason why she's so good at what she do. Because sometimes for me when I get off to a slow start she's telling me adjustments and ways that I can be better. She's like, sometimes you need to close your door, she's forcing you high side. So whenever she's been vocal to me, but also it's just, you can't -- you should try -- you can't score on her one-on-one. She's, she's strong. Like, she's a force to be reckoned with. So I feel like with them, like 6'-6", opponents know that. So if they're throwing the ball into her it's a great day. If they're throwing the ball into their teammate when she's on 'em, it's a great day for us. So I feel like she's a force to be reckoned with.

**Q. Rayah, how different is the defensive challenge for you going from a Kansas State team that's built around posting up a 6'-6" center, to now an UConn team that's going to test you on the perimeter with their pick-and-roll game and then when they can go five out?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: That's what March basketball is all about, adjustments. And really, for me, that's when I'm like locking in on our game plan and what Coach G is asking of me. Like whether I'm sagging off or I can be a spy and help this teammate do that. So I feel like also the Big Ten has prepared me for games like this. I played Betts, and then I come down, I have teams like Maryland where they're less big, but also just like I'm willing to accept the challenge. And it may not be a post-up game, but it may be me a little bit guarding the perimeter. And I know my strengths, which is shot blocking, so I'm just going to continue to be do whatever I have to do defensively for my team.





**Q. This is the third time in basically a year that you have played UConn, but the teams are so different because of injuries. How tough is it to prepare? You know them, but you don't know them, because of the different makeups of the teams?**

RAYAH MARSHALL: I feel like when we don't -- you know, also we have an advantage, when you think about it, they haven't really played us without JuJu. But also I feel like it's March. Throw the game plan away and really compete. That's what we are here to do.

**Q. Kayleigh, didn't seem like any of your freshmen class had any nerves against Kansas State the other night. Why do you think it is that you all are prepared for this moment?**

KAYLEIGH HECKEL: I think there's been different times throughout the season that we've all stepped up in different ways, and I also think our veterans and Rayah and Kiki, they all obviously put a lot of confidence in us and they think we can just go out there and play well no matter if they're playing well. They have so much confidence in us which obviously helps us have confidence in ourselves.

**Q. Kayleigh, staying on the theme of that freshman class, obviously you're excited for everyone on your team, but do you feed off each other's success? As freshmen is there a different bond -- we sort of saw Avery and Kennedy up on the podium last night and they were cracking each other up.**

KAYLEIGH HECKEL: Yeah, I mean, I think we're all super close. We all live in the same apartment complex, and we're always spending time together. I think that we've grown together and have developed really good relationships together. So I think just seeing each other succeed and being able to support each other through our first season of college basketball has been really special for us.

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