

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

Monday, March 31, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

USC Trojans

Lindsay Gottlieb

Talia von Oelhoffen

Rayah Marshall

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 78, USC - 64

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: Yeah, I just managed to talk to the team in the locker room without crying, but I can't promise you it's not going to happen up here. I want to start out first by congratulating a UConn team that is really good, obviously could win the National Championship. But to me it's the way they do it. You know, nothing but respect. I will say this. On December 23rd, we were on our Christmas break, and I was at a Christmas party or something, and I got a text from Geno two days after we had just beaten them and he said, Hey, I was just thinking about what a great win that was for you and your program, and I love your team and, you know, hope we meet up in Tampa. Surprisingly he didn't say Spokane, but he said Tampa (laughing).

And I just think about the people who just are secure enough to be able to see it from the other side and take a moment two days later to say that was a big win for our program at their place or for me because I'm from there. And so to them I would also say as much as this hurts for our kids, how do you not have respect and root for a team that had to figure some things out too along the way and has battled injuries.

Then what I said to our team in there was from the second we lost at this round last year, I said the bar's been raised, the standard's been raised, the expectations have been raised, and even though we've loss at the same point and



stage, I think our team a hundred percent delivered on raising that bar and raising that standard, and I thought it took a lot for us internally to get to the point where we were legitimately a national championship contender, a real top-5 team all year long. We lost a tough game to Notre Dame and we looked inwardly, and I just be more proud of a group.

We lost a National Player of the Year, probable, one week ago today and we've won two NCAA tournament games, second and Sweet 16 rounds, because they really became a team. And I was just very proud of the way that we competed tonight. I think you saw the heart and character of our team on display, and I'm disappointed for them that we don't get to go to Tampa and get two more games, but I'm not sad with the way this group represented themselves and I think our senior class is really, really special.

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

Q. Reaching a second straight Elite Eight, what does that say about the culture that you've built here? And Rayah, if you can comment on the culture and kind of how you've seen it shift throughout your tenure here.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I would say that I don't even think our freshmen completely understand how hard it is, right? And that's a good thing. That means the expectations and what we were trying to achieve was kind of prevalent and felt every single day. But I do think it takes a lot of work by a lot of people. I think once we lost at this point last year, we asked the people who were returning to be better. We said to the freshmen coming in, the bar's been raised, and then we brought in some transfers who could help us take the next step.

For Rayah and Clarice to be with me for four years, I just -- I told 'em in there, the meteoric rise that they have been part of is really significant, but I also think TVO and Kiki coming here this year changed our program too. It kind of put us in a different echelon, and I think everyone feels it and now we're going to get past this stage at some point and they're going to have their fingerprints all over it even though they won't be physically with us on the team.



RAYAH MARSHALL: I feel like the growth of the program speak for itself. The moment Coach G got to SC everything changed from our strength and conditioning coach -- we actually were gifted our own strength and conditioning coach when she came to the school. Her contract just wasn't all about her. She made sure that our locker room got upgraded, our strength and conditioning coach got upgraded, our athletic trainer, we got one of the best athletic trainers. So when our leader demands things, it really shows outside of wins, and I couldn't be more grateful for that.

Q. Rayah, Lindsay's been telling the story about how you guys beat Arizona your freshman year and she said that's going to be you some day, like, you're going to be the team that everybody wants to beat, and you said something to the effect of, like, that lady is crazy. Just thinking about that moment, how does it feel to be sitting up here with Lindsay after all you've been through?

RAYAH MARSHALL: I mean, it's hard to kind of put into words. She put her actions behind her words, and freshman year wasn't the best, but for the following year, I mean, to bring in a ton of transfers and make it to the NCAA tournament was a lot. I just watched Coach G work her magic in front of my eyes. Me and Clarice stayed down, and I'm also grateful for that and grateful for the assistant coaches that she brought in. It might show on the court, but not only just number 13, but she checks in on Rayah Marshall too and I'm forever grateful for that.

Q. That third quarter rally and the fact that you trimmed a 19-point deficit to five to start the fourth, it would be easy for a team to just give up when you're down that much, but you showed a lot of fight. Can you talk about just that -- what kept you guys fighting and kept you guys in that game all the way to the end?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think there was never a point where this team gave up, so making that run was huge. And coming out of halftime, we knew we weren't out of it and we just needed to have a good third quarter, but it just felt like we couldn't get stops when we needed to at critical moments during runs. So credit to UConn and the adjustments they made and hitting big shots, but just proud of how we fought regardless of the halftime score.

Q. Rayah, you left it all out there, had one of your greatest games. How would you describe your tenure and your emotions right now knowing so close but yet so far?

RAYAH MARSHALL: It's kind of hard answering that

question considering the season just ended, but I mean, we all went down fighting as a Trojan and that's the culture, continue to fight on.

Q. What do you feel like you learned about this team in the wake of JuJu's injury, given over the course of this past week, and for Talia too, what do you feel like Rayah showed you tonight being that this was her last game at USC, the amount of time she's spent here?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, I think for the team just showed that we have a lot of dogs on this team and people that can step up. Obviously the freshmen, their performance in the Sweet 16 was unbelievable and just a preview of what's to come in the next few years.

For Rayah, she's just been the heart and soul of this team, and I'm really proud of how she showed up today. She gave this game everything she had and rallied us all together in that third-quarter run. That was all her. And so she's been our rock all year, so I'm happy that she had a game like that. I'm disappointed that we couldn't get that win for her.

But, yeah, she's been a huge part of building this program and our success this year and, like Lindsay said, every year going forward.

Q. Talia, you've only been here for one year, but clearly it seems the program has had a lasting impact on you. How do you compare this season to some of your other years in college basketball?

TALIA VON OELHOFFEN: Yeah, it's been very different. I think I knew coming in I was going to have to have a very different role than I've had on any team not just in college, but my whole career. So it's definitely been a journey for me trying to fit into it. It's been really hard for me, honestly. I'm very proud of our season and all the wins, but I think it was definitely a struggle to find myself within that role, but I was willing to do it for a National Championship. So it sucks that that didn't pay off, but I definitely learned a lot and I'll take that with me for the rest of my life.

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

Q. You referenced that Arizona game. When they were No. 2 in the country, you guys beat 'em. I remember that game because I remember being the only media there, and I remember asking you that in the grand scheme of things, that maybe was just another game on the schedule, and you told me you didn't feel that way, that you thought it was one of those season-defining, program-defining wins. When



you think of everything that's happened since then, two straight Elite Eights, to get highly touted freshmen to commit to your program, just in that amount of time, how have you seen that program grow and in terms of like how -- did you think it was going to take -- you know, in terms of that amount of time? Did it happen I guess kind of quickly?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think Rayah alluded to it a little bit. I was very, like, transparent in some really good conversations about taking the job. I was in a unique situation as an assistant in the NBA, and I was not -- I wasn't, like, dipping my toe to see how quickly I could get a different job in college and when the job came open, I didn't need a recruiting pitch from Mike Bohn, who was the athletic director at the time. I said, I know everything that USC is, I know what USC is capable of, I know all the intangible things that come with it, but are you know, you guys, the school, the athletic department really willing to invest in women's basketball?

And I asked those questions a lot, and she just sees the outer parts of it. It's not just pouring resources into it. That's something, but it's really buying into women's basketball. And they said yes, and they backed it up every which way along the way.

Now, when I got there, that first year was a lot harder than anything I had ever experienced because when it's not a winning culture, it shows up at different times in different ways. It not bad people and it's not people not wanting to win. It's just you don't know how to.

So I really felt like that game was significant because we weren't a great team that year, but to beat the No. 2 team in the country that was -- I couldn't get recruits at that point to choose us over the schools in the PAC 12 that were better than us at that moment, but then eventually, I had to get people that were willing to see the vision even before we were good.

So I just think there's been so much work that has gone into the infrastructure so that then when we could get the talent and all the pieces and the people here committing to the culture stuff, then we were ready to go. So I don't know a timeframe. Maybe faster than what people thought, but to me, like, the work that went in to build it and then the right people coming and the people investing in it every day, it kind of feels like where we're supposed to be. This is where we wanted to be, and we now feel, like, disappointed that we didn't take this step this year, but obviously there are circumstances that make it really hard at this stage to win this one. This was the hardest one to win.

Q. First and foremost, congratulations on a great run. I know it just ended. How do you process that -- when you came in here, you said, no doubt, no doubt, even though the journey, the path, would change without JuJu, but how do you process that now knowing you were without JuJu tonight?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, I think at some point the emotions of the last seven days will kick in more. It was only tonight a week ago that one of the best players in college basketball and just so meaningful to everything we are went down, and I'm just so proud of the way that everyone rallied. And we wouldn't have been able to do that if there wasn't continual growth throughout the year. TVO mentioned it. We were really good all year, but things were not always perfect and easy. When you're striving for the level of greatness that we were striving for, it's hard at times, and those kids really bought in to hard conversations and getting better even when we're winning games, sometimes by 20 and 25 points.

And so, yeah, it's just really disappointing to not -- I mean, I just know what it's like at the Final Four, and I know what it's like to have a chance to play two games for a National Championship, and I'm disappointed for everyone involved in our program to not be there, but I think when I just take a little time and -- like, I'll still be so just, like, crushed for JuJu and the game because that just wasn't supposed to happen like that. But I also think -- I have no doubt that her comeback's going to be legendary, and I have no doubt that the strength of the program is not in doubt, and I think we proved that.

Q. I know this is not your focus right now, but curious how this USC team you've now faced couple of times and prepared for, how do you compare them going into the semifinal with a UCLA team that you know really well?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I think it will be a great basketball game. I think two kind of different styles, one team that plays through the post and through the post and through the post and obviously showed the other night they have a ton of -- I mean, we have seen it all year, a ton of great shooters as well against a team that spreads the floor and can play at times five guards, if you call Sarah a guard. She's just a basketball player.

So I think it will be a really intriguing matchup. If I had to guess, there'll be more points scored in that game than the Texas-South Carolina game. Two completely styles, right? But two really great teams and different styles.

Q. I know Talia mentioned you called Rayah the heart and soul of this team all season. How did you see that

show up tonight, especially in that third quarter that Talia mentioned? And what does Rayah personally mean to you after all this time that you spent coaching her?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, if you don't know Rayah's story, you should look it up. She's from South Central L.A. One time I drove with her to a community service event, I think it was her sophomore year, and we just were talking, and she told me how when she was in junior high, she lived in an apartment with her mom and her stepdad, and I think there were, like, 17 people in the two bedroom apartment, and someone made sure she got to a really good high school because they saw the talent in her, and someone made sure that she had the things in place to achieve, and she did that, and she came to USC. And I remember her freshman year she would literally, like, talk about, Oh, the dorm is awesome, and the dorm food was great and we have food available to us. Like, the gratitude she showed all the time and the pride that she had in wearing a USC jersey while being from South Central is really meaningful.

She's a kid that just texts me and says, I'm thinking about you. Like, I know this game or whatever it might be. Like, what do we need to do? Or how are you feeling? Like, she is just a really incredible human, and I think her growth has been unbelievable. I think she and Clarice in their own ways just define what it means to buy in to what a basketball team needs you to do, and I'm really happy for her that she had 23 and 15 tonight, but there have been times this season where she's impacted the game without scoring that much and her value to us has been on display all year.

I think she's a WNBA post player, I think she will get drafted, and I think she's going to stick on a roster, but to me, I just -- I think she's a kid that's improved my life, and I'm glad we've had these four years together and have the next years together, just in a relationship of coach-player, but even if she graduates, I think that won't go anywhere.

Q. When you have that conversation with her after she had signed to USC and you came on as the coach, did you have to do any convincing with her or was she just in?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She was in in the first two minutes. Nope. She said, I'm a USC person. I'm from -- this is my community. And she said, and also, the people that know you called me and said, This is who you want to play for.

So those relationships I guess that I had in L.A. club coaching thing, and so she said, I've got you. I'm in. You don't need to worry about me. Let's go. And her mom is

equally supportive and has been the entire time.

Q. Avery and Kennedy were so big in the last round, Kayleigh too, but obviously, they struggled a little bit more tonight. What did you just see from them over the course of this whole tournament? What does that tell you maybe about the future of this program going forward?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, UConn made it hard on us. It wasn't like they weren't ready or didn't show up. Like, UConn did a really good job defensively and obviously we were still getting used to not having someone on the floor that can just draw three people all of a sudden.

But I think Avery and Kennedy and Kayleigh Heckel and our other freshmen, like, they are high, high-level players, they're competitors, they're winners, they're ready for any stage, they're capable of scoring a bunch, they're capable of defending, making just winning plays, and I think that's what they showed at this stage, and I just know they're going to keep getting better, which is unbelievable.

Again, you talk freshmen coming into a program like ours, it's not -- I mean, they will play a lot, but it's not, you know, learn on the fly and, you know, we'll give you a year or two to figure out how to win. Like, they had to know how to fit into a winning team right away and make plays under duress, and they did that, and I just think they're as good as any freshmen in the conversation with the best freshmen in the country because of what they did on a really good team that was needed really all season long.

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