

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - California Baptist vs UCLA

Friday, March 22, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Kiki Rice

Charisma Osborne

Media Conference

CORI CLOSE: It's such a great privilege to be a part of something and to be able to host the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament at home here in Pauly, and excited. Excited for the opportunity. Excited to play a really good Cal Baptist team. Excited to have just a packed house, hopefully, in Pauly. Encourage everybody, if you haven't gotten your tickets, make sure to do so, this will be a spectacular event. Excited to be a part. I've been doing this 31 years. It never gets old. Just really excited for the adventures ahead.

Q. Kiki, it came out earlier this week that you're going to be one of four athletes featured on the ESPN documentary. Just what has it been like the whole season kind of having the cameras following you around and just what's that been like balancing everything?

KIKI RICE: Definitely been an adjustment. Took some time to get used to the camera crews being around. But I think it's a really good opportunity to bring more attention and exposure to the women's game. And for me to continue to tell my story and to help amplify the stories of this team and this program. It's been really cool. It's been fun. We've had a lot of cool experiences with the cameras and everything. But I'm looking forward for it to finally come out.

Q. You had a lot of attention even before you came to UCLA, and then with the NIL deals and everything. What is that balancing act like between everything that goes on off the court and trying to play your game and perform on court?



KIKI RICE: I think I've just focused on continuing to balance and prioritize. I know obviously my number one priorities are basketball and school. So making sure that those are at the forefront and everything else that comes with that, I'm just finding ways to fit it in and take advantage of the opportunities that I'm getting. But I'm not losing perspective on what is getting me those opportunities in the first place.

Q. Charisma, this is definitely your last go-around this year after we all thought last year. What's it like leading this team into the tournament with a 2 seed and the possibilities of everything that's in front of you guys?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: I think it's super exciting. I think the team is really excited. I think that we can do some really big things this tournament, and I'm not the only one leading. There's a bunch of us out there. And I think just everyone just bringing their best and trying to get the best out of each other. But, yeah, I'm super excited. And I think this team can go really far.

Q. What's it been like in the back court with Kiki this year, what have you seen with her mannerisms, improvement from freshman to sophomore?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: It's been so fun playing with Kiki. She helps out so much. She plays point most of the time. Just helping communicate the calls and things like that. And I think that's like the biggest improvement. Like, that's one less thing I have to worry about because I know Kiki will be out there and saying those things.

But she's just improved so much, whether that's finishing -- I mean, she already was a great finisher, but she's been doing that amazing for us. And getting her to shoot open shots, it's been so fun seeing her knock down 3s this year and get to her pull-up, and obviously she's a three-level scorer. So being able to see all that improve has been so cool.

Q. Charisma, I know you had the opportunity, like we said before, to enter the WNBA draft this season but chose to spend a fifth year at UCLA. Could you tell us



more about your decision and what went into that?

CHARISMA OSBORNE: Yeah, there's a lot of different things that went into that. But I think the biggest thing is now I wanted to come back and win a national championship here at UCLA and specifically with this group. I thought last year we had so much potential, and obviously we were so young and kind of inexperienced a little bit. And I think this year there's so much more experience and we kind of know what to expect. I can really see us going all the way.

Q. There's been a rise in media around women's college basketball this season with Kiki's ESPN documentary. I'm wondering what that means for the visibility of the program.

CORI CLOSE: I think that we're experiencing sort of a global moment in women in sport, whether it be the U.S. national soccer team, whether it be obviously the moment we're in right now is women's basketball and honestly you have more of the big names in the NBA talking about the women's tournament than you even do the men's tournament.

But I don't want it to be about an us-versus-them, we want basketball to grow. What I'm excited about is that women's basketball is having their moment, and we're not trying to slice the pie differently; we're trying to grow the pie. We're trying to grow the pie of exposure. Grow the pie of investment. Grow the pie of revenue for the sake of our institutions.

We want sponsorship of women's basketball to grow. We want media rights to increase. We want ticket sales to go up. And that doesn't take anything away from anybody else. That just adds to grow the pie, and we're just at a position with more eyeballs on the sport, ratings being better than ever that we're in a position to be real contributors, and we've gone from being a cause, maybe, and a Title IX cause to being a product, a growth stock, a product worth investing in that's proving to have a very high return.

KIKI RICE: I would agree and echo everything that Coach Cori just said. Also as a player, it's really fun to be playing right now. And I don't know -- if I had been 10 years older and played college basketball a few years ago, I don't know how different my experience would have been. I just think that the media attention, the really cool experiences, the exposure, the attendance at games, it's just been fun to play at a time where women's basketball is at an all-time high.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: And I think it's super cool, even

on social media, I'm seeing way more about women's basketball than I am -- women's tournament than the men's tournament. I think that just shows how much the game is growing, and it's super fun to see. Even some of my friends on other teams, seeing them pop up and things like that. I really am impressed with how much the game has grown even since the tournament when it was COVID and there was all those disparities and things like that.

CORI CLOSE: I think it's a challenge also for us right here in L.A. You've got two teams that are experiencing unprecedented success in women's basketball, UCLA and USC. And really continuing to appreciate and challenge the media to give it its due. If you had men's basketball as a 1 seed at one school and men's basketball at a 2 seed at another school, what would that publicity and buzz be like in Los Angeles?

I'm really hopeful that we will not only grow on the national and global scale, but you'll see that right here in L.A. by the way people are coming behind and exposing more and more people to women in sport throughout Southern California. Specifically right now, you've got first and second rounds at USC and UCLA. We need to blow this thing up in terms of exposure.

That's why I always say thank you to you all because we can't take advantage of our moments if you guys aren't telling the story.

Q. I know the focus is on one game at a time and everything, but how much do you think the experience and the Pac-12 will help in this tournament because your team kind of drew, in what soccer terms is always called, the group of death with the top 4 seeds?

KIKI RICE: I think the conference schedule and non-conference schedule will prepare us well for our tournament run because we played a lot of top teams in conferences all across the country. We just know what to expect and how to prepare for tough games day in, day out. So we're not going to be surprised by top competition.

CORI CLOSE: But there is no tournament run if you don't take advantage and have your mind set on one game at a time. I know that sounds very cliché, but the reality is our present focus is really all on Cal Baptist.

But to your question, which I think is really important, is the varied styles at such a high level is such an advantage going into the tournament. Cal Baptist, they shoot an average of 32 3s a game, and we've got Utah who likes to play that way. We've played other teams that we can draw from, okay, our scouting report is going to be very similar to how we played Utah. And I think we draw from the varied



styles of plays as we focus on one game at a time.

Q. With two regionals in L.A., is it disappointing in any way that both are Saturday/Monday instead of being -- it's a good schedule tomorrow, if you want to see both, but there's a possibility on Monday fans may have to choose.

CORI CLOSE: I think I really was hoping they would be staggered. Obviously that's not under my control so I'm not going to give any energy to it. But I think that when we're trying to think about growing the game, I think that decision makers in with ESPN, for instance, or with the NCAA Tournament, bracketing and scheduling, I think to keep those things in mind are really important.

So I guess we'll see how it goes. Mostly from a media perspective. Are both medias going to go from one game to the other and make sure they're given the due that they've earned. I think it's really important. I guess it remains to be seen. But my first glance it seemed a little bit shortsighted to me.

Q. What improvement have you seen in Kiki's game this year and what was it like kind of having the cameras around?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's such a compliment to her because, honestly, it wasn't that big a deal. The cameras, credit to the production crew and the group that came along with us to tell the story because they were really collaborative as well as considerate to what our journey and what her priorities are.

But I think that also it's so huge because I don't ever have to worry about what she said about books, ball always being the priority. And then after that how can she build her brand, how can she take advantage of exposure opportunities.

And this didn't just benefit Kiki, it benefits our whole entire program and the individual brand building of our individual players. It was a win-win all the way around.

But I think the specific things I've seen in her game really come down to three things. Leadership, defense, 3-point shooting. She's worked at all of those. I remember watching her in the U-19 semifinal game. She was given the assignment of being the defensive stopper of the top player from France in the World Cup. I remember sitting with her dad and saying, this is a new level of defense that I haven't seen from her.

And that has been really fun to watch her grow in her defensive intensity and her pride especially in her

one-on-one defense.

Secondly, what Charisma said earlier, her leadership. Really learning to find her voice and what's it like to lead and influence within her personality. I think she's really finding that, little by little, really making strides on that.

Then the numbers speak for themselves from a 3-point shooting perspective. If people want to go under all the screens they went through, went under last year, they're going to pay.

And she's just proven a level of consistency with her hard work, and I've seen her turn a weakness into a strength in her 3-point shooting.

Q. You're big on mental and in the moments of joy and everything last year it was the dance parties going into the tournament, just anything new this year?

CORI CLOSE: I'm not in charge of that. I don't have enough cool points. What's the joy factor? What are you guys doing to stay loose, Charisma; you're usually the one right in the thick of that.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: We did have Ms. Val come teach the team a dance. Maybe that footage will come out. I didn't see it. We need to approve it first.

CORI CLOSE: But it's interesting, as you said that, Ms. Val, obviously seven-time national championship gymnastics coach here, now a professor of Charisma's and the grad program, came and talked about two critical things, talked about gratitude and about joy and brought them through the choreography. That's what she's talking about there. I think that's important. But go ahead, Charisma.

CHARISMA OSBORNE: I think our team is just fun in general. Usually when you guys see clips of us dancing, it's not planned or anything, it's just the right song at the right time and everyone's just super excited.

Q. Kiki, have you been more prone to dancing this year than last year, the center of the circle you were a little hesitant?

KIKI RICE: I wouldn't say that -- I would say I do it a little more. I would say a little bit of improvement. But that's just a fun thing I like to do with my teammates and, of course, everyone's always on me because they know that I'm not the best dancer, but it's okay. It's fun.

Q. Cal Baptist has the best 12th offense in the country. As you said they take 32 3s a game what are

some ways you've practiced to combat this strong offensive program going into this weekend?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's going to be a real group effort and a focus. Our ability to think tactically about how we chase them off the 3-point line is going to really be dependent on how solid our one-on-one defense is with different match-ups in different positions. It's going to be difficult.

Also, they're so good in transition. And so we want to be a dominant rebounding team, but also be really good about getting back in transition. Sometimes that's a hard balance to find. We don't want to get into a situation of trading 3s and 2s, that's definitely to their benefit. It really does start with we've talked a lot about chasing them off the 3-point line, transition defense and for us attacking the paint and dominant rebounding, that's the best way to slow down their transition game.

Before we go, I want to say thank you to all of the people at UCLA, our administration, our marketing staff, everybody that's behind the scenes. This is a lot of sacrifice and work to be able to host the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament. It's such a tremendous advantage to our student-athletes and our competitiveness, and so I just want to say thank you to all the people that have sacrificed to make this opportunity a reality for us. We understand that there is sacrifice, and we want them to feel very appreciated by our women's basketball program. Thank you all for being here.

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