

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Media Conference

CORI CLOSE: We are just really -- feels like forever, you know, in between the Big10 tournament and now, the opportunity to compete in March Madness.

We are just really excited. I think there is two real big focuses for us. Being very present. You need all your energy, day by day, round by round, possession by possession, to go to doing your job.

And so really just focused on that. I think the second thing we're really focused on is playing to win, playing to go get things, playing to earn what you want.

There is a level of aggression, and I think that we showed that in the second half of our championship game. I think we got a taste of what that feels like, what the mentality was like, huddles were like, how do we play the game.

And so I think as we always say, success leaves clues. We are really trying to latch onto those clues. There is an aggression of going to take more possessions, play the way we believe we can play, and be totally present, focused. 1-0 cannot be a cliché to us. It has to be a complete narrowing of our focus and a commitment to be right where our feet are possession by possession.

Q. I know this year has been a lot of unprecedented success in this program. You guys have been really intentional about saying this is a celebration for not only this team, but previous teams, alumni, people who have set the stage. Can you maybe tell us a little bit about any special alumni you guys have connected with during this season?



LAUREN BETTS: I mean, I think for me, I always talk to my past teammates from last year the most. Charisma Osborn and Cam Brown have always been there for me throughout my UCLA journey, and they have always been my biggest supporters. Before a lot of the games they text me.

I think it's just really cool for them to see how amazing this team is, and obviously they love and support us no matter what. I always remind them that I wouldn't be here in it the mental space I'm in if it wasn't for the amount of support they gave me throughout my couple years here.

So always thankful for them. And of course like one of the reasons I came to UCLA was because of Michaela Onyenwere. She's from Colorado and she went to my high school, so she's always been a really big inspiration to me. She's reached out a lot as well.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, similar. It's been really cool because we have had some alumni come back to practice. This past week charisma was here, Bek Gardner was practicing with us and just continuing to make us better and be supportive of our team.

And Cam Brown has been at so many of our games. She's always cheering courtside. I can hear her pumping me up.

But it's great. I think the alumni has been really supportive. Jordin Canada sent me a really nice text just before our game against USC, and just to hear so much support and for us all to feel that means a lot.

Q. I think Cori said a couple times you guys are not as confident as we would expect you to be. Over the last couple days, what are some of the things that are giving you that confidence heading into the tournament?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, we're all feeling pretty good right now. Had a really good week of practices and feel like this team has really taken a step in the right direction in terms of how we're leading ourselves and just the energy where are bringing and our focus.

I think that's really good, because we're feeling our best at the most important time of the year. But I do think there is a lot of confidence that we have in each other and this group that we need going into this next month.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I agree. It's how we show up every day at practice and hold each other accountable and set the tone every day. If we continue to do that we're going to be in the best position possible.

But I think just continuing what we're doing right now.

Q. Lauren, there aren't a lot of dominate low post players in this game anymore. The game has evolved in other ways. What's the key to being consistent and successful as a low post player, other than having the requisite size?

LAUREN BETTS: I think for me personally, patience has always been my biggest thing. Obviously when I'm catching it inside obviously there is a few people running at me at a time, so just making sure I'm not rushing myself.

I think also just, I don't know, consistency for me, I think it's been the work I've been putting in this season. Coach Shannon and I have done a lot of work outside of practice, which is something I wanted to be better at.

I think for me it's just the work that I've been putting in. That's what's been giving me the amount of amount of confidence I have this year.

Q. KiKi, a lot of athletes are motivated by disrespect, people don't believe in us. As the Big10 champions you guys are as close to a favorite as possible to be. How do you approach that as an athlete knowing you're expected to do well and there are expectations on this team?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I mean, obviously we're expected to do well. I think that comes from within us and this group. We have really high expectations of each other. We know the work we do on a daily basis and how well we are prepared. Most of that kind of stuff is internal expectations. That's really what we're focused on.

I do think we'll town play with a lightness like joy like Coach Cori said the other day. We're at our best when we are playing with joy and having fun out there, so like not letting any outside expectations affect us too much is something that we really pride ourselves on.

Q. You always talk about how it's easier to get lessons from losses. Coming out of the Big10 tournament, even with the win, like what lessons were you able to

take from your performance there?

LAUREN BETTS: We actually talked a little bit about that today in film, just reminding ourselves of the clues that obviously we got from winning a game like that. I think that it was just like the mentality that we all had, all 13 of us, going into that game.

I think we all just wanted to win it so badly. We weren't going to be denied. Everyone showed up in their role regardless if they were playing or not. I think that's really important for us, just to be present.

I think moving forward there will be stages in the game, things will go wrong. So making sure we all continue to stay present and we hold each accountable and just stay confident and aggressive throughout the game.

Q. I know Cori does a lot of visualization every day to start your little personal video highlight. How do you feel those moments where you can just watch yourself doing something good have helped boost your own confidence heading into this NCAA tournament?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, like throughout the whole season we watch our visualizations and those have become a staple of our everyday routine. We've always been watching those visualizations, but in our head visualizing what we want to feel like winning a championship and how we're feeling when we're in Tampa and everything.

Obviously taking it one game at a time. I think those visualizations really put our mind to like what we want to achieve and really encourage us.

We know we want to have a certain feeling, feel the confetti on our bodies and everything, so working to get that every day.

LAUREN BETTS: I just think it reminds all of us, like especially when we start feeling like doubtful throughout the season, there will always be times throughout the season where you don't feel as confident. I just think it just proves to all of us the type of players we are.

Just seeing that on our your phone every single day before practice helps with that a lot, so... (smiling.)

Q. (No microphone.)

LAUREN BETTS: Uh-huh.

Q. (No microphone.)

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think obviously like that was



really fun, but we want to do it again, so...

KIKI RICE: For sure.

Q. Similar to what I asked Lauren, there aren't a lot of low post players that dominate the game anymore.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah.

Q. The game has kind of evolved away from that. She is one of one.

CORI CLOSE: Right.

Q. How do you commit to that as a program, a team, to be consistent and productive in the low post?

CORI CLOSE: Right. Every year is not a scientific formula it's an art project. When we look at our team about what are our strengths and what do we need to play through, how do the pieces fit together more effectively to create a greater whole than just piece by piece, the sum total of that.

So obviously it starts with Lauren, right? So when that happens, we sort of build how we wanted to play through the paint, and then how does that influence that people don't want it rotate off her so it creates different driving lanes.

So it just has this domino effect. But it starts with her. The reality for us is that if she gets a touch -- people work possessions all the time just to create rotation. Like how are we going to do this, create rotation, flatten out their defense, force them to be in a scramble mode.

We have a really good way. We just pass it to Lauren and force that every single time. So I think knowing that -- and I think last year we didn't do as good of a job. We had a high usage rate, but I don't think put her in as many scoring positions at that usage rate.

The usage rate is when the ball ends with a shot from her. She had a really high usage rate nationally, but our efficiency wasn't quite what we wanted it to be.

All summer, fall, you know, about every other day we're working on just what do Lauren Betts' touches like and how many possessions do we go sometimes and maybe lose track.

It's not rocket science. We really focused on she needed to play with lowering her base. She needed to play doing more work before she got the ball, because in trying to create what we call no move needed, if she is too far from

the basket we know a double, triple team is coming.

It's really building that out. It's doing the small things with elite consistency that we knew were going to lead to her being more efficient.

Q. Obviously there has been a lot of turnover the last few years. Kiki, Gabs, Londynn, they came in as the No. 1 recruiting class in the country. I'm sure you'll have a lot of time to think about this further. What does it mean to you to see how far they've come in growing into leaders?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it has to do with growth, loyalty. Those are things that are a lost art these days. The consistency of these young women to be committed to our mission. Which is not easy. It's not just about wins and getting a degree. We ask them to do a lot.

To see their commitment and then to see the culture evolve and the fruit of their labor, it's gratifying to watch. This is not about us. This is about helping young people become who they want to become and impact who they want to impact.

So when I see that group being sort of the core that -- they're the center of the wheel, right? Some new spokes have come in and they've done that, but those guys have really been the centerpiece in many, many ways.

I am incredibly grateful for their commitment, loyalty, work ethic, and what they've done for our culture.

Q. You were just talking about Lauren being a focal point of this team. I know in parts of her career she's had trouble being that center.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah.

Q. How have you seen her kind of grow into her own confidence and own that role as like really own her superpower?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, you know, it's interesting. I was just talking to her on the way over here to the press conference. I finally was getting so many texts and emails. It's so funny. I've got -- obviously she did something that's never been done here and she's First Team AP All-American yesterday.

I maybe got one or two on that, but I finally counted this morning, and I've gotten 38 text messages or emails about her, the story that she shared in Sports Illustrated and how much that touched people.

I said, you know, Lauren, to watch you walk in authenticity in such a courageous way is awesome. That's exactly what has led her to -- there is a level of freedom in her. I just think when you are completely authentic and willing to share your story for the sake of others, it releases a burden from your shoulders.

I think she's experiencing that. I think that's a big piece of how she has grown. And she is still growing. She'll be the first to tell you. She's still growing, and what that looks like and what happens when she misses her first two or three shots. How can she respond quicker to that disappointment.

To watch her, obviously -- and the improvement on court is great. But to watch her have the courage to understand, yes, you're one of the best players in the country, but actually what's helped her in that is that she's realized she is so much more than that.

That has freed her up to be all she can be as basketball player, because everything is not riding on that anymore.

Q. Do you have any connections to Southern at all? Know anybody from over there? Are you just welcoming a new team into the fold?

CORI CLOSE: Just welcoming a new team into the fold. I don't know them. When I was at Florida State we always -- we had an HBCU right there in Florida A&M and we just had a great partnership with them. They were literally across the railroad tracks.

You know, we always had HBCUs come in and play in pre-season. I had a better sense who was there. Been out here 14 years I don't have as much.

I will tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed their band, first of all. Second of all, they flat out defend. The persistence, consistency, athleticism, sort of dog mentality on the defensive end, boy, they caught my attention.

And we were saying in our staff meeting, we need more people to slide their feet in the full court continuously on the ball like them. Just a ton of respect and admiration.

But I don't have a personal connection.

Q. What does it mean to bring in an HBCU to this and elevate them?

CORI CLOSE: They earned that. We're not doing that for them. I don't want to take anything away.

I think there is something we have, we have a great

history, which started in Pac-12, that has been intensely trying to build bridges and partnerships with HBCUs and trying to honor the work they're doing.

So I think this is cool that it's worked out this way. So continue to build that even though we're both in new circumstances and new platforms and new arenas.

But I think it's always great to understand people better from different backgrounds, different places. I think it's always better to look for opportunity to connect and lift others up.

If this is a small piece of that, great.

Q. This year has been groundbreaking for women's basketball in Los Angeles in particular, having these two programs going at it like this. This weekend is the culmination of that, at least in the city.

CORI CLOSE: Right.

Q. What's it going to mean to the city to have two arenas full of fans cheering women's basketball all weekend?

CORI CLOSE: That's huge, right? I was really thankful. This year -- I think we played on the same days last year. Thankfully we're staggered this particular year.

You know, I think it's huge. It's huge we're continuing to move the sport forward. Huge in growing basketball, let alone just women's basketball in Los Angeles.

I think it's been huge that both times we played each other it has been the hottest ticket in town financially, celebrity row, you name it, it was happening.

And how do we bring that into the biggest stage. Now I can't speak for USC, but I'm very hopeful this will be the first time we sell out in the first and second rounds for the NCAA tournament, not that matchup or our matchup against South Carolina.

So I think there are more steps to make still, more growing to do, but this is a special time. I would challenge people not to miss it.

Q. Did you have some sort of celebration for Lauren being this programs' first AP First Team All-American?

CORI CLOSE: We didn't actually. We practice in the morning so we all sort of saw it right after practice. We sort of splintered, but she came back out and she could almost barely contain -- she went over to tell -- Coach



Shannon is her go-to person. She had tears in her eyes.
She was so excited.

And just to be able to affirm that, but what I love about
Lauren, she said this is a team award. I know that I don't
get here by myself.

And so then to have it also happen that the article that
she's really being affirmed so much came out on the same
day.

We haven't yet but have to do that right. She's the first one
to say she just really focused on being 1-0 and doing the
best we can to play our best when the best is needed.

But we are going to have to figure out something with that.

Thank you awesome, appreciate you guys.

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