

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Kiki Rice

Janiah Barker

Media Conference

UCLA 84, Southern 46

CORI CLOSE: You know, man, does Southern play hard. They are one of the top teams in the country at forcing turnovers for a reason, because they just play so hard. Their ability to sit in the stance and to sit down and guard for long periods of time is really admirable.

I just have a lot of respect for how hard they play. All the credit to them. I loved how we respond in the third quarter defensively. I think that's really where we got to have urgency all the time.

We couldn't have more different game plans here, but no matter what the game plan is, be counted on to do your job. I thought the second quarter we lost track of that a little bit, but I was proud of how they responded, especially in the third.

I don't care about anything else other than we earned a chance to try to go 1-0 again.

Q. This is your first year playing with Lauren on this team. She's such a unique player, dominant player. When you come in and play with someone like her, are there parts of -- like do you have to learn how to play with a player like her, and how have you progressed in that and how has this team progressed in this?

JANIAH BARKER: It's really easy to play with a big that's really skilled, and good at her job. Lauren is a Chico. We talked yesterday, left, right, up down, A button couple of times.



So it's really just a blessing to have her on the team, you know what I'm saying? Been nothing but easy, because not only is she a great player, but a great leader as well. She leads the team and we follow right behind her lead.

Q. KiKi, I was wondering, Coach Close just said you earned the right to go 1-0. From a student-athlete standpoint what's the emotional, mental challenge in the next 24, 48 hours, and how different is it compared to the 32 games in the regular season?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think it's nice now because we're out of school, done with finals, on break, so we have more time to just mentally relax. I do think it's a quick turnaround. You're just fully focused on preparing for Richmond and getting ready for that physically, mentally, making sure our bodies are right and just the scout.

But it does help that we're not in school and have some more time and everything. But, yeah, it's quick at this time of the year. Turnaround is very quick. You haven't played these teams so a lot is new, but we get used to it and stuff.

Q. As Coach said, you got to -- things are a little bit slow. I don't want to say it's a pattern this season, but kind of showed up again today. How do you play through that and what do the coaches tell you, tell yourselves, when things aren't going your way, and as we saw, you were successful the rest of the way?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think we just got to continue to be focused on coming out from the start of the game with intensity. The first quarter we did well, we did that. But we do have -- we had too many slips today in just our focus and our attention to detail.

At this point of the year every team is very good and talented, so you don't want to give any room for teams to make runs to come back. But it's hard to be focused the entire time, but at this point of the year we have to do that.

JANIAH BARKER: To piggyback off what she said, basketball is a game of runs and something that is going to happen is the other team is going to be going on a run. Just depends how we snap back to it.



So I think we need to have a quicker reaction time to the run so that we can control the game and make sure we're in control the whole time.

But, you know, we'll do good. We got it.

Q. KiKi, talk about how you were able to control game. You had seven assists. Seemed pretty poised tonight. It was physical.

CORI CLOSE: Zero turnovers.

Q. Yeah, talk about that.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, we did a lot of work this week on handling pressure. That's something that teams have done to me in the past, try to pressure me and get the ball out of my hands. I got to be able to take care of the ball and find my teammates and still get into the offense.

That's my job, and I really worked on that this week, just being prepared for pressure, denial. I think I still have areas to improve in that today, but overall I was glad about how I took care of the ball.

Q. Coach, as you said, they're a scrappy, gritty team. They were doing everything they could against Lauren tonight, but she was too long and strong. What can you say about her play style and does it change at all against the smaller grittier opponents?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, just real quickly and I will let you guys finish with the players. I think the reality is every team will look different, but every scouting report stops with how are they going to try to double up on Lauren.

This time not only did they send doubles, but the pressure on the guards were just trying to limit vision. I think every game will look a little bit different. That's our job is to prepare of what our best angles are and then be ready to pivot during the game.

Q. JB, I think I saw you blow a kiss. Was that to the crowd or someone in particular?

JANIAH BARKER: No sometimes they be heckling, so I want to give them a kiss. Just lighten them up, yeah.

Q. You did that after the scoring run. Huge sequence of plays. Where was your confidence at that point in the game?

JANIAH BARKER: My confidence at an all-time high always. I think I was just happy in that moment. It's fun to

be fun when you're out there on the court. When you're on the court and playing basketball and having a fun time I feel like that's the best.

Q. KiKi and Janiah, you both are -- as a team you guys scored 25 in the fourth quarter, most in any quarter. At that point the game was pretty much in your hands. What does that say about you guys that you kept up the intensity like that as the game was going down?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, speaks to our depth and the amount of people we have that can come in and score and make plays. I think Coach Cori said we had six people in double figures and two other people with nine points.

CORI CLOSE: Yep.

KIKI RICE: I don't think there are a lot of teams that have that variability in terms of people that can be scorers and threats offensively. That's one of our strengths of our team for push.

JANIAH BARKER: That, the depth, and also, too, coming out that second half and making sure we kept our foot on the gas and wanting to have a different result coming back in the locker room after -- a different one than we had at halftime.

Q. This question is for KiKi. Janiah referred to Lauren as a Chico, but she had a double-double tonight. What kind of confidence do you have in her and the rest of your team, and what does it say about her that she could just pull out a double-double out of nowhere against a team pretty confidently, pretty easily?

JANIAH BARKER: Thanks, man.

KIKI RICE: No, I think we have the utmost confidence in Lauren. I think the way she's really just come out, and this season has been consistent in how she's really dominated every single team speaks a lot to her growth and work ethic she did over the past spring and summer.

Look, teams can't really guard her. I think we got to continue to feed her the ball. She makes the right plays. I think she's really, really improved her passing. That's one of her best areas of improvement, because she's seeing so many bodies, finding all the shooters we have on the perimeter. It's really difficult for people to game plan for her.

Q. What sorts of adjustments did you guys make coming out of halftime? That second quarter was a little bit rough? What did you do differently in the third quarter to hold them to just seven points in the entire

quarter?

JANIAH BARKER I would say -- you got it.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I mean, we talked about rebounding. This was a big thing, defending their tunnel drives. They really like to get down the middle. Making adjustments quicker in the game, that's something we have to do better as players. When they went on their scoring runs before we have a timeout or we have to -- Coach Cori has to tell us, just be able to make those adjustments quicker as a team. I think that will be really important for us.

Q. JB, I had a question about your toughness tonight. You was all over the floor. Couple and-ones. Talk about the way you were able to stay physical tonight.

JANIAH BARKER: Yeah, I think when we play like more physical teams I get more physical. When we play like USC or play Baylor -- this Southern team was very, very physical. I don't know, I just feel like it's like the SEC. It just comes out and just os ready to go at it at whatever time.

I think I'm just physical in general. I just think sometimes I'm just having to figure out when is a good time to use it and when it's not. Figuring that out and making sure I'm not overusing it. Playing against physical teams helps me bring out my physicality as well.

Q. Coach, kind of if you could expand on when you said you earned the right to go 1-0 for next week, what is the mental, emotional challenge for you and your staff in the next 48 hours?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's just a really clear marker that nothing is promised. We don't want to talk about six games. Don't want to talk about now five games. We want to talk about one game.

I think that the quick turnaround is actually really comfortable for us, especially with our history in the Pac-12. Every weekend we had a game that was on a one-day turn around, so we're really used to that as a coaching staff in that situation.

But I think it's just a marker and a boundary for us that that's gone now and now we have a new opportunity to earn another game really. Really it's just a refocus kind of thing for us.

And I do think the kids, we've had two official visits with recruits and final exams in the last ten days, so all those things contributing to a real challenge to be incredibly sharp and focused.

So I think we're now a little bit more freed up, and I think it's going to be really important for us to be micro-focused on just that one game plan.

Q. I know Angela has been her for a long time. I feel like sometimes she flies under the radar. You've see her every day. In what ways does she impact this team, the game in ways that maybe people don't notice?

CORI CLOSE: Well, you notice that -- we thought they were going to come up and guard her, and they have a four-guard lineup, but she takes a lot of the pride that if they're going to come up and pressure our point guards full court, we can go back to her and she can bring it up.

I thought she did an excellent job, especially in the second half, of being someone who could bring it up and help us get into our offense off the pass. So I think that was really critical.

The other thing that flies under the radar with Angela is how well she can switch and keep smaller guards in front of her most of the time. We struggled a little bit tonight about downhill drives, especially tunnel drives. But overall, Angela's ability to do that is really remarkable for being someone 6'4", and it's been a really important part of how we schemed in terms of the defensive end of the floor.

Q. I know this game just ended. I don't know if you got to see much of the Richmond game, but they blew out Georgia Tech.

CORI CLOSE: I did. I saw every minute.

Q. What's the focus for Sundays night?

CORI CLOSE: Oh, it's really similar to how we played Creighton earlier this year, and also Creighton in the second round of the NCAA tournament last year. You know, I was so impressed both on film and what I saw today against Georgia Tech in terms of how they th shoot the ball, share it, spread you out.

I also was really impressed about how they used their length on the defensive end. Got tons of deflections, disrupted what Georgia Tech wanted to do. And so they're going to really challenge us, because -- that's going to pull Lauren away from the basket. Lauren can do it. Obviously though then we are vulnerable to some of those basket cuts or drives.

They're a team that's really built like on layups and threes, the way that they play their-five-out motion and really share



it, and boy, they -- they not only hit open shots early on that big run in the second quarter, but they hit some tough shots end of shot clock, right about when they cut it to 12 or I think I one time 11.

And then, boom, played great defense in the last two seconds of the shot clock hit this really difficult jumper. They're going to really challenge us to get out and guard on the three-point line and really be able to communicate through screens. It's got to start with our defense so that way we can play the way we want to play on offense. Really impressed with them.

Q. Coach, I remember talking to you at the BigTen media day. You called Janiah a missing piece. Goes from being a starter, comes here, wins sixth player of the year. What are your expectations for her earlier in the season and how has she met them as the season has gone on?

CORI CLOSE: She's kept a growth mindset and just been somebody that -- we've asked her to really let us slow her down in order to then have her be more fundamentally sound to speed her up again. You saw it tonight in terms of how physical she can be.

She has phenomenal timing on rebounds. If they're going to send multiple people at Lauren, she's a great post-up player, you know, so I think that she's continued to have a growth mindset. That hasn't been easy. Sometimes her minutes were up and down. She didn't start. Really credit to her. She said, I don't care about starting. I just want to get better.

I just think especially until the last about three to four weeks, I feel like she's hit a groove of what does it look like for her to be an elite teammate and a puzzle piece for a championship level team.

I think that took a lot of courage on her part, humility, and her ability to own things, and then continue to grow has been remarkable and much needed.

Q. Coach, can you talk about the physicality your team had in the first quarter? 13 rebounds and a couple blocked shots.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, that's when we're at our best, you know. We talked about our team not being a team that plays not to lose but to go win and take possessions.

I think when we are physical we're anticipatory, when we are talking early, taking things away, that's when we're at our best.

What we needed to do is be able to use our depth and not get tired of doing it right. That the next woman up is going to execute the scouting report just like the person before them.

The good news is we were able to play really reasonable minutes. I think physically we were able to respond and be able to be ready to play at a really high level on Sunday.

But the reality for us is that needs to be how we're built, that we go take things. We don't try to hope we win possessions. We go dominate possessions. Even when it doesn't happen, then we need to refocus quickly, and that needs to get our mindset again.

So that needs to be sort of our DNA.

Q. Coach, you have talked about how this team is really built on defense. Seemed like in the second half the team really put the pressure on. Only allowing seven made field goals. How much pride do you take in that? How much pride do you take in how this team reacts in that situation?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, first of all, I got to give credit to Tasha Brown and Shannon LeBeauf who are co-defensive coordinators. We have a different assistant coach that coordinates the scout for every game, but those guys have been the foundational teachers of our defense.

Our team -- you can -- Tony and I are co-offensive coordinators, and both of us are keenly aware that to win in March it isn't going to be built on pretty offense. It's going to be on gritty defense, controlling rebounds, taking care of the ball. If anything, we got to get on those offensive coaches and forget 17 turnovers. We need to take care of that.

But I think our team knows that it's -- that's something under your control. That's something that we don't need to be perfect at. But we need to be absolutely locked in, especially when we have a rim protector in Lauren the way we do.

If we can really sit in our stance and guard and force really contested twos, it puts us in good rebounding position and let's us get out and run.

Q. Earlier in the year you -- when you guys were undefeated I believe you said you have to play the role of bad guy in terms of motivating.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, felt that way today, too.

Q. Obviously being the top overall seed there was a

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certain expectation.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah.

Q. How does your motivational approach shift or change? How have you taken that role this time around?

CORI CLOSE: I don't know if I've said my motivational approach has shifted or changed. I was fired up tonight. I thought I needed to coach them hard to hold the standard. I understood the expectations. I want my intensity to lead the way of what was important.

You know, I think I've shared this all year that we've been talking a lot about we have a lot of talent, but that is not going to determine our ceiling. What determines our ceiling is our character, our choices, discipline, grittiness.

I didn't want there to be any question of what we were trying to earn. I thought it needed to start with me. I challenged Gabs and Kiki after the game. I was like, when you see me like that, I need you to like rise up, too. I am trying communicate to you that there is another level of urgency in us. I want you to take that and make it contagious within your teammates.

And so I was trying to set the tone to that ends. But if I've got to motivate for the NCAA tournament we have bigger problems. I just want us to have a high level of urgency and discipline.

Q. How did you see Londynn ramp up that intensity and competitiveness as the game went on?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, Londynn I thought did some huge things for us. I really challenged her to be a -- to create more catches. Because of the way she was shooting the ball that that was going to space the floor. If we could create ball reversal and catches through her and she could make a post touch, we could go inside out and that's how she's going to get her best threes. That's what happened, especially in the third quarter.

What I love about Londynn is the way she responds to adversity. You know, there was ups and downs today for her, but I just think she's grown so much in her maturity of, hey, what's my next right play? How do I have next-play speed that just takes me to the next thing the team needs from me?

I've really been impressed with how she's grown in that area. I think it's been a huge thing in our BigTen Championship run, and I think it was a big deal today, too.

Q. On Sunday, Coach, you talked about how you wanted to see Pauley Pavilion packed.

CORI CLOSE: Yes.

Q. What was your impression of the crowd tonight?

CORI CLOSE: Well, the crowd was really good and I want it to be great on Sunday. Let's sell this thing out. Like you've got the first time in school history, a No. 1 seed, let alone an overall No. 1 seed. You've got a really good Richmond team that's going to force us to go to another level if we want to earn another 1-0.

This town is enjoying. Like let's sell out the Galen Center for USC and the Pauley Pavillion for UCLA. We were enjoying such a special time of a new level of women's basketball throughout our city.

These women have worked their tails off, not just to increase their performance, but they serve their community well. They're true student-athletes, and we want to do this with and for the community that we get to interact with.

So I think it's a huge opportunity, but I don't want people to miss out. You want to be a part of this team's journey, and so come help us earn another chance to be 1-0. And I think it's really huge.

On that note, as important as the crowd is, you all are really important. Just thank you for continuing the buzz. Whether it's print media, online, TV, whatever it is, you guys have to help us spread the word of how special basketball is in Southern California right now. And as you tell their stories, more people get connected, and that's how we grow our fan base.

Thank you to you and I'll see you all Sunday.

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