

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

UCLA Bruins

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Charlisse Leger-Walker

Coach Cori Close

Media Conference



Lauren and Charlisse, how does it feel for you guys to see Kiki get that recognition as well?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I honestly think the biggest thing and something that makes our team so special this year is that we're not really caring about the recognition and the individual works that we're getting because we know this is a collective team effort. It's obviously cool we celebrate each other but I think the important thing is just to keep the team the main focus. I try not to focus on any individual awards.

I think we all, as a team, do a really good job of that and we bring each other up because we know this is a collective effort. We're not here because one person's individual play. We're here because we play really well together and that's my biggest focus.

CHARLISS LEGER-WALKER: I think Kiki's obviously very humble and she is always team-focused and that's something that makes her so great, but Kiki is amazing. She's an amazing player. I'm so proud of the work she's put in to get here and get that recognition. She deserves that and more so I'm just really proud of her and the season she's having. You can see it in all aspects of her game. We're just really grateful she's on our team and we get to play with her. She leads us so well, so I'm really proud of her.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I'm not surprised that these in those conversations. I agree, I feel like Kiki is someone more people should talk about. I think she works so hard and all the recognition that she's getting this year, she deserves it all because she's a great teammate. We all love her and she continues to put the team first and I think that when you're that selfless of a person and a player, your bound to have great things happen to you so I'm just really proud of her.

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by student-athletes, Lauren Betts, Kiki Rice, and Charlisse Leger-Walker from UCLA.

Q. For Lauren, the piece that you wrote in The Players' Tribune, I think it was yesterday. I know you've shared part of your journey with mental health but what made you want to write that specifically?

LAUREN BETTS: I think it was a good opportunity for me to show the growth that I've had in the past few years. I think the last one that came out was during my junior year when I was kind of in my transition and I think the point where I'm at now, I've healed so much since my sophomore year and I think to where you it from my perspective was really special for me and I think just to here all the amazing things that I've learned throughout these three years.

So, I don't know, I think it was just an amazing opportunity for me to continue to speak on what I stand for and why I play basketball and why I think for me this is so much bigger than myself. I think the people I have been able to impact really means a lot to me and that's why I wanted to do it.

Q. For Kiki, and also for Charlisse and Lauren, but for Kiki first. For you to be third team All-American selection, Player of the Year conversations alongside Lauren, how does it feel to have that recognition? Seems like you have been a little under rated this year in national conversations. And following that, for

Q. I wanted to ask Lauren and Kiki, obviously you're laser-focused on the task at hand but at the same time, having these couple of games being your last ones here at Pauley, are you allowing yourself just maybe here and there a moment to kind of take things in and just sort of reflect on the journey that got you guys to



this point and how after these two games you won't be back here playing in front of this crowd?

LAUREN BETTS: Honestly we try not to talk about that that much because it's very emotional. I will always say I'm so grateful for UCLA and everything that they've done for me. Every ever since I'm come on campus, they've been so amazing to me and my process and my journey and, yeah. I don't know, it's going to be really special I think to have these last two games with all the fans here and my mom's flying out to watch so that's really amazing to me. But, yeah, I don't know. I think it's really crazy. I really can't even, like, process all of it right now. I'm just trying to focus on practice today and that's it.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, same here. I can't believe these will be my last games here my four-year career, but just really excited about the opportunity to play here. You're not guaranteed two games at your home at the end of your season, so it's great that we have been able to earn that but the fact that these will be the last games, it's crazy but grateful for all the times, memories that I have been able to make in Pauley and hope to finish it out on a great note with this team.

Q. For Lauren and Kiki in particular, what's it been like as far as finals this week and Charlissee, I know you're a grad student now. How's it been for you?

LAUREN BETTS: I just finished my finals... what day is it today? Friday? I finished them on Wednesday. Wednesday was my last official school day at UCLA. Very happy to be done with classes. But, yeah, I'm just grateful to be done with classes so I can focus on this tournament. Guys, being a student-athlete is very hard, so I'm very grateful to be done.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I finished last week so I was pretty fortunate. I think last Thursday was my last day of class. But, yeah, it is pretty crazy. I don't have to go to school anymore. I never want to. That's exciting. But, yeah, it's really cool to have finished up. Definitely frees up some more time.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think for me, I have done school the longest so it's nice to finally be done and I think as a grad student I probably had a lighter load than these guys so I've sort of not been in class, in-person classes for a while. It's been noise for me. I've just been enjoying the basketball.

Q. I just want to ask all three of you the rust versus rest conversation. You guys being the host team, you have a little bit more of a break. Do you feel like that's a factor at all? Do you feel like you get stagnant at all

or do you think it will be easy to get right back into it when the game starts and does being at home as the host team help with that?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think we -- it's been a long season so we've been able to take advantage of the time that we've had off to rest our bodies. That's obviously really important but continuing that intensity and quality preparation and practice allows us to be ready for the game, to be ready to step on the court and we'll be prepared for that, obviously. Having not played a game in a while, it's not an excuse to not come out ready, so we just got to hold that standard, prepare and practice like we would any other time and we'll be ready to play.

Q. For Charlissee, I know it's been a long time since you have been able to play in this tournament. What is it that's special about this time of year? What are you looking forward to?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I think any time you get the opportunity to continue into the post-season and be part of March Madness, it's an incredible opportunity and for me to come out and be able to do it with that group of girls and this team, I'm beyond excited to do that.

Stepping out on to the court every time, it's just another opportunity to have you in the game and do what you love and so for me it's kind of a very full-circle moment being able to play again. I'm just excited to come out into this first game and be part of March Madness again.

Q. This question is for Kiki Rice. Since you got, like, awards for your scholarly efforts, how would you say it for you during your time at UCLA balancing athletics with academics?

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think UCLA is a fantastic school. One of the reasons also I came here is because I felt like I could take advantage of not only a great basketball program but a great school and I could get a great education here. So I've definitely been intentional to take advantage of the professors, the classes, all the education that I can get here. It's tough. It's not easy at times, but we have really, really good support in terms of helping us balance basketball with school.

We have a great academic advisor, Andrew Garcia, who travels with us. He helps us plan classes. He'll reach out to professors for us, so that support, those kind of people are really, really crucial to all of us in terms of balancing everything. But it's not easy. The life of a student-athlete is tough, especially during tournament times when we're traveling, but the support makes it much easier.

Q. I was wondering how much the Texas loss changed the trajectory of your season.

KIKI RICE: Yeah, I think we talk a lot about learning from each opportunity and each game. Each game this year has taught us different lessons and Texas obviously the one that we lost, you'll take a lot of things from that, but we also talked about not staying in the past and just focusing on, okay, take the lessons, take what we can learn from that, move on and apply them.

How can we get better in practice? How can we get better in the next game? That's definitely been something we've been trying to do with each game we played this season.

So just the fact that we lost, I don't think that really changes our outlook on how we go about preparing and learning where the game. Just proud of the way we have been able to respond, for sure.

Q. Coach Close has spoken all season long about how much joy the team has not just on the court but off the court. Is there anything in particular you guys have done as a team this week to kind of keep things loose?

LAUREN BETTS: We literally all had dinner last night at STK and it was only players and then we went to the graddie baddie's apartment and Ang made like a Kahoot for our team with some nice little questions on there that maybe I shouldn't say out here. But, yeah, it was really fun. We had a great time. Any opportunity that we get to hang out as a team is always really fun for all of us. I think especially going into this tournament, just having a little team bonding is really nice, so.

Q. For Lauren in particular, with Sienna, I'm just wondering if -- obviously a freshman going into this, it can be overwhelming, an event like the NAAs, have you given her any kind of tips or inside info on just what to expect and maybe not make this the big deal that everybody else is making it in terms of your mental prep?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I feel like if I overwhelm her with too much, it's going to be a little bit -- it's going to be a lot for her. I think just go into it and have fun. You don't really get a lot of opportunities to be on a team like this and play at this level so I think just enjoy the moment, have fun with your girls and the freshmen. Take advantage of this opportunity, but basketball-wise, she knows what to do. Go in there and do your role and do whatever the team needs from you, but, yeah, I just want her to enjoy it because this is, like, really special experience to compete here.

Q. For Charlissee, obviously you were with the team last season but now you're able to play. Is there a kind of whiplash of transferring into a new program and then automatically seeing so much success and making it to the tournament with a new program and getting acquainted with everyone while being so successful? What are the emotions that go into that over the course of the season?

CHARLISSEE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I think that's one of the silver linings of being able to red-shirt last year. I was able to be a part of the program success that we had on the court and go through that emotionally with the team at the same time. Now coming to this year and being able to be on the court and contribute that way, I think that transition was kind of seamless, just because I had that time to build the relationships with my teammates and the coaching staff. And with all of that experience last year, you kind of understand what it takes.

For me, that's been really fun being able to come into such an elite program and an elite team and now I'm surrounded by so many amazing, talented, elite players that, it's just when you're out there, sometimes you're just like wow, I'm watching people sometimes do all these things and I'm like this is so much fun. It's just a great way to play basketball. I would say that even though I'm playing for the first time with this team, it's felt like I've been here for a lot longer than that. That's what's made it really fun this year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, guys.

We are now joined by head coach Cori Close of UCLA. We will start with an opening statement from the head coach followed by questions. Coach, go ahead and take us from here.

CORI CLOSE: This is so fun. I am just so thankful to be preparing to be able to experience this. This is my 33rd year of Division I coaching and my 15th as a head coach and it just never gets old. I come to this with incredible gratitude. I'm going to be present. I'm going to be just all-in for whatever we have right now and I'm looking forward to where the journey will lead.

Q. I was just talking to Angela right now and she was going through a lot of the growth she's made both on the court as well as a leader and whatnot. In the time that she's been here, where have you seen the most amount of growth from her and how important a key is she to this team?

CORI CLOSE: Working backwards, she's a huge key for our team. I think she could be the X factor in each game in a different way. She's just got such a complete skill set

and she's a match-up nightmare for the other team. She's an elite defender in multiple positions. I think she's an incredible key for our team.

In terms of how I've seen her grow the most, I remember a conversation the very first year and I was trying to talk to her about sort of separating her identity from performance and that she's so much more than a basketball player and she was like I don't want to be more than a basketball player. I want to be all-in just being a basketball player. That's what I came to do.

I think about now and I give Tasha Brown so much credit for this because she's really connected with her on the mental side of the game on what that looks like. You can be just as determined and competitive to master your craft and still surrender the outcome and know that you're so much more than a basketball player. Those aren't exclusive. They fuel each other.

So to see her now, we just had the mind gym earlier today and see Angela taking copious notes for her to talk it all in. That is probably the number one thing identify seen in her change and her time with us, just how she approaches the game mentally and how she sees herself as an elite competitor but so much more.

Q. When you're dealing with first round tournament game versus, say, what you dealt with in the Big Ten when you're in a neutral site, how much does the crowd maybe help possibly offset a lull or also is there something you have to maybe guard against maybe being too emotionally charged up?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think I just try to not -- we always say state change is a part of it. It's how you frame it and how you have self-awareness to channel it. I think there's going to be emotion. There are going to be state changes. There are going to be incredible moments being at home and I'm pretty confident we're going to have 10,000 people and it's going to be a great atmosphere. And these players deserve that. They really do. I think that we just want to fuel every experience.

I love energy. I don't actually care. When we were empty championship in the Big Ten Tournament, it was 90% Iowa fans and those people, they travel. They are passionate. They're amazing. I just think, though, it's all energy. I just think our ability to take the energy of what we're getting to experience and channelling it to being present, focused, and trying to be the best version of ourselves is what we're going to plan to do.

Q. I read Lauren's story in The Players' Tribune. What was your reaction reading that and hearing her open

up even more about her mental health?

CORI CLOSE: You know, I just love Lauren Betts. I could not imagine when I was that age have that kind of courage and having experienced some of those things alongside her and with her, to see even just being over there and watching her answer the question about why she did that I think spoke to her growth. For her to -- we always say you never outperform your self-image, but in this case, to your question, it's incredible to watch how she's grown and healed in miraculous ways. I couldn't be any prouder.

I didn't see it and I walked into Pam Walker, our director of basketball operations, her office and she just had these big tears and I said, what's wrong? She goes have you head the article? She goes, I am just so proud of Lauren. And I text her and just said I could not be more impressed and inspired by your courageous vulnerability.

Q. Coach, you obviously have talked a lot about the fact that you had the pleasure of learning a lot from Coach Wooden. What are you taken into this year's tournament today and tomorrow that reminds you of Coach.

CORI CLOSE: Make each day your masterpiece, right? If you focus on things out of your control, it will adversely affect the things under your control. Our whole thing about being present, focused, all I can do today is try to be the best leader for our team today, to be a great teacher today, to try to get better today.

I think the more consistent, it actually goes to your question. The more consistent we can be to how we've been all year, I think the more we handle the emotions, the distractions, the other things really, really well. I think Coach Wooden really didn't -- he really saw the games as the byproducts of being a great teacher in practice and that it really wasn't any more important to him. In fact, it was probably less important to him because it was a byproduct of the more important thing of teaching and mentoring and equipping the young men he had the opportunity to serve.

So I just want to do that. If I can be a tenth, a hundredth of the teacher he was -- and I think also the thing I take so much is that it was about him and the purity of truly wanting to invest in the young men he had contact with and had investment in, this is not about me. This is humbly hoping that they have this incredible uncommon transformational experience that they're proud of 40 years from now just like they are right now.

Q. Cori, away from the Xs and Os, I'm wondering if you've tweaked anything just within the team adds a result of last year's Final Four run, something that,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

hey, we're going to do something else a little differently or that we learned from and we want to employ that this go round?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think a little bit of our language and how we talk to make sure that we really do stay just today. We're not really worried about, we have been enjoying the NCAA Tournament, both men's and women's like you always do. It's so fun. What an incredible couple of days we're in right now.

But really not talking about seeds, not talking about match-ups down the road, not talking about any of that and really controlling our language. I think language is a really powerful thing and it shapes sort of how we think of and frame perspectives together and so been trying to really be -- it really came from them in terms of wanting to really monitor how we stay present-focused.

I really haven't leaning on our leadership team for the most part. It's Gabs and Lauren and Charlisse and Kiki and going, hey, what do you think about this? This is what I'm thinking. What do you think about this? So I really rely on them a lot to give me a pulse of the team. There's been a whole bunch of things that when we met last year at the end of April we really debriefed everything that we learned from how we had our travel party, who ate in different rooms. And I actually called some other Final Four coaches and said, hey, this is what I'm thinking as I adjust and want to learn from everything I can, what do you think? And so tried to seek their wise counsel. I think we have a much tighter plan and I think it has a lot to do with we're going to be a little more insularly and even how we travel to different pieces but honestly if we don't do a good job in today's practice and doing that, it doesn't really matter.

Really the most important thing is the present focus but we really tried to take a proactive approach even last spring and summer in planning that if we had the opportunity to have that journey again, these are the things that we will implement.

Q. Following up on what I asked you about choosing joy at the Sunday watch party and even going back to what you've said in the past about finding your why with the team and what your adjustments have been from last season. Was that an emphasis, the fact that you're just more questioning what your why was and the joy that you found from your players, did that make choosing joy this season more of an emphasis?

CORI CLOSE: I think we had a very productive year last year, very ground-breaking, but heavy at times, and I think that I had some regrets on some ways in which I handled some things and as a leader, I had to just sort of go okay,

what could I learn from this? How do I go about things differently? But I also do think that I want to be a thermometer a thermostat, not a they are mom tort. You want to set temperature in a room as a leader. I don't think I did as good of a job of that last year as I needed to. This year I really wanted to set a perspective and be very consistent in setting the standards but also the temperature of the room and how we frame experiences and I think joy was something -- I wanted it to be. I knew I didn't have to coach this team's commitment or work ethic. They have already developed these habits in a really amazing way.

In fact, I was -- one of the things I was talking to Jordin Canada today who happens to be here and I was looking around at every single person was in the gym working extra and I said we've come a long way, haven't we? And she goes wow. I thanked her. That started with your kind of vision.

But going to your question, it was a matter of I didn't have to coach work ethic or commitment, but I do think it was important that I took the pressure off and that we had joy in the experiences and I thought that was an important ingredient for us becoming the best version of ourselves. And so I think that was also a formula of me being a better leader, one that I could look back and go, okay, I think I was who they needed me to be. Because, again, it's not about me, it's about serving them well. I just think it was a huge piece from the temperature we needed to set in the room and how we needed to experience the year, not just accomplish the year.

Q. Can you talk to me about the improvements in the coaching abilities of Michaela Onyenwere. How's it been having her on the team? And how has she improved as a coach?

CORI CLOSE: I told her this the other day. There's a lot of things I knew she would be good at right away. I knew she would connect with the players right away. I knew she would be able to recruit right away. I had no idea she would be so good at scouting. She has really unpacked scouting reports with a detail-orientation, a way to commune at a time that to our players. She's brought new ideas to that. It's been really fun to watch.

I also knew she would be great in terms of when she jumped into practice, just the role modeling that she would be able to provide. You have a pretty good scout team when you have Michaela Onyenwere and Jordin Canada helping you out here once in a while. But she's got a really good mind. It's just been really fun to see her find her voice and just her footing in that and we have just been so lucky to have her.

Q. What stands out about this Cal Baptist team especially compared to the one you saw two years ago. I think they only returned like three players from the roster.

CORI CLOSE: Right, I just think he does such a great job with that team. I happen to know some of their staff members and they're good friends with our graduate assistant Madison Blevins, so I've gotten to know them a little bit. But his ability to -- he has very high IQ players. Their ability to stretch the familiar and shoot the three really puts pressure on us. They're excellent in transition. They switch a lot of screens. They have bigs that step out. But just year in and year out. I think their style is they're going to attack you from the three-point line. They're going to pull everybody out of the point and be able to attack probably behind you in back-cuts and try to second cut out to the three-point line.

It's going to be really important that we understand personnel, we understand actions and it's usually not the first action. They're trying to get two to commit somewhere so they can get a secondary action. They just have our respect.

I also will have the support they get. They had several busloads of people out here a couple years ago for the NCAA Tournament and they've proven themselves. I watched their game versus Nebraska earlier in the year and so it's not just they're good in their conference, they're good against power four teams. They have experience in that.

I think they're high IQ. Their high amount of internationals they have on their program. I think all of these things facilitate -- and he's got an established culture but it facilitates just a really high-level program. That's the hardest style for us to play against and so we have some experience with it because we have had to do it before but they definitely have our attention and our respect and I really respect the job they've done over time.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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