

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Oklahoma State vs UCLA

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

**UCLA Bruins**

**Cori Close**

**Sienna Betts**

**Kiki Rice**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Sienna Betts and Kiki Rice from UCLA.

**Q. Kiki, obviously last game in Pauley Pavilion. What's it been like being able to play here the last four years? And do you maybe recall what it was like when you first stepped on that court and saw all the history, all the banners, and that sort of thing?**

KIKI RICE: Yeah, it's crazy it's already going to be my last game in Pauley. I feel like the four years have flown by. Just really grateful to have a great experience playing here.

I feel like each year the support of the fan base here and the L.A. community has gotten better each year. I think just seeing yesterday, like seeing the crowd we had in a first round game like that was just so fun to step on the court and play.

I remember when I first came here on my visit to see, coming on the court and seeing the banners in the gym and in the hallway, it just kind of motivated me and motivated this group to want to put up a banner of our own. I feel like each year we've made steps, we've grown as a program.

It is really special for all of us to have been able to share the court, share the last few years together. Just grateful we're able to finish it out on a good note.

**Q. Question for both of you, we were just here 15 hours ago, quite a short time. Have you looked at film on Oklahoma State? What problems do they bring to the game?**



SIENNA BETTS: We definitely have watched film. They're a really, really good team. I think we're going to all just have to -- sorry, I never had a question about another team before.

(Laughter).

They're great shooters. They have good interior as well. I think we just have to play really connected defense and just play our game.

**Q. Sienna, last night all three freshmen got to play, which didn't always happen all season long during the regular season. How important was it for you and your fellow freshmen to get out there and get your feet wet as far as playing in March Madness goes?**

SIENNA BETTS: I'm just really, really happy that we all were able to go in and leave some kind of splash. We're just such a great team, and we understand our roles, and we understand what the team needs from everyone. We're just happy to be a part of it in any way that they ask and that the game asks.

Just happy that we were able to go in and deliver because, yeah, it's all an honor to us.

**Q. Sienna, kind of piggy-backing off that, you had a double double. What kind of personally mentally does that do for you going into the next round beyond kind of like your freshmen camaraderie?**

SIENNA BETTS: I'm still a perfectionist, so I'm looking at what I could have done better. A lot of those rebounds were my own on misses. So I just want to be able to improve and learn from that game and take what I can into the next game to do better.

**Q. Sienna, Lauren last night talked about how excited you were for how well you played on defense. Throughout the season, just where do you feel like you've grown the most?**

SIENNA BETTS: I think I've grown the most like mentally,



just being patient with myself and just feeling comfort in the role that I have on this team and knowing it's okay and knowing that it's helping for the future. I'm just happy to be part of that role.

Physically, I'm obviously still trying to improve, but I think I've grown a lot just in my rebounding and just dictating shots. Switching onto these little fast guards because in college the 4 is like another guard. So that's something very new to me.

**Q. Kiki, you guys have such a veteran team that has gone through so many of these experiences before. What's it like to have Sienna being part of the rotation, sort of seeing it through her eyes again as a freshman?**

KIKI RICE: It's super cool. I feel like it reminds me a little bit of like what all of our experiences were like as freshmen. I think freshman year is definitely really tough, but to see the growth that each of our freshmen have had throughout the season has been really incredible.

You learn so much. You're in a completely new environment. It's just a whole new level of basketball. It's not easy when you step out on the court, but I feel like Sienna and the rest of the freshmen, they're great players because they have really high expectations for themselves. I think that's allowed them to grow so much this year and to continue to make an impact in whatever way that is.

**Q. Kiki, I believe you and Gabriela came in in the same recruiting class, correct? What's it like reflecting back and knowing that you guys were foundational pieces for being able to accomplish so many firsts for this program?**

KIKI RICE: It's really special. Gabs and I are the only two ones left from our freshman class, but I feel like we've been able to really stick it through here. We came here with a mission to just get better, develop, help the program get better in any way we could and to kind of develop a culture. I feel like that has happened each year.

Looking back the growth and the times that we've had this year, it's all been worth it because I feel like we've really helped take this program to a new level. Just excited about the impact we've been able to have. It's also great for us because we know we're going to graduate this year and the program is going to be in really good hands with the next young group coming up. So just really excited about that.

**Q. Kiki, last game in Pauley. If you could go back and give your freshman self some advice, what would it**

**be? And what would you do differently over the course of your four years?**

KIKI RICE: I don't know if I would do anything differently over the course of my four years, but I would say the piece of advice that I would give myself would be just to enjoy every moment with your teammates, to stay confident and recognize that like there's obviously going to be a learning curve and there's going to be a lot of growth that you're going to experience throughout the four years that you're here, but that's what's going to make this so special.

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by head coach Cori Close from UCLA.

CORI CLOSE: Good afternoon. I appreciate you all being here today. This time of year, I just am like so thankful to be around this team another day.

Someone said to me last night -- my whole family's in town -- like aren't you tired? I'm like if you're rested this time of year, something has gone dramatically wrong. I am so thrilled to have to stay up late and watch film and have a chance to prepare with this team and to hold the standard for another day and try to get better.

I'm just full of gratitude and thankful you guys are here too.

**Q. When you look at this Oklahoma State team, both offensively and defensively, what maybe stands out? Do they remind you of any teams you've played this season?**

CORI CLOSE: I think that what stands out is their ability to shoot the 3, their versatility, their work down the tunnel with the high ball screen. They're extremely good in transition. It's going to be so important for us to make them play later into the shot clock, which is going to be easier said than done.

But I guess with the exception they don't have like a really tall big, but they actually remind me in terms of their style and some of the actions that they run of Oklahoma. Their guard play. And one of the big things that we talk a lot about is trying to make them play later in the clock than they're comfortable with.

Now we go through all the analytics, and the later you have them play in the shot clock, the less efficient they become. They're 13th in the country in offensive efficiency. They're really, really good. Defensively I think that we obviously need to really hunt the paint. We've got some advantages with our size there.

But they're a really good team. I think that they play really



hard, and they play -- I was so impressed with how connected they played yesterday against Princeton.

Jacie does a great job there, and it's going to take us stepping up.

**Q. You have so many players who are projected to go to the WNBA. So I'm just curious, do you have any thoughts on the CBA announcement, and kind of what that means for this moment in women's basketball?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, we've been waiting for it for so long, it's about time. I'm really thrilled for players and their futures. So many people have paved the way.

Just like the growth we're even experiencing now in college, we have so many people before us to thank that fought for better exposure and TV rights, who fought for Title IX and resources to be allocated appropriately.

I think it's similar right now in terms of the CBA. We need to really thank the people in that room that fought hard. I know Michaela Onyenwere actually has been really involved in processes as well. So we've been able to hear about what's been going on. But thank you to all those people when it was really hard that you kept it going and kept it growing and pushing the game forward.

I think it's really exciting for what the WNBA can grow into and what our next steps can be in terms of growing women's basketball.

**Q. Coach, you just alluded to it, that this is a really good offensive team. Looking at it right now, they're 17th in the nation in field goal percentage. What does your team have to do to limit them in the paint as well as away from the basket?**

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, it's really difficult because they stretch you so far that it makes those -- to take away the paint makes it more difficult. Especially that they're attacking down the tunnel, the middle of the floor, the majority of the time. So you don't have this established help side rotation.

But we've played a lot of teams like that. I think about Illinois that also plays down the tunnel a lot, and we're going to have to do a great job with our pick-and-roll coverages. If you force rotations out of the two people that are in the pick-and-roll, that's when you start to get yourself in scramble mode defensively.

They don't shoot 3s off the bounce as much, but boy, the way that they shoot catch-and-shoot 3s, if you make a mistake in your pick-and-roll coverages in the middle of the

floor, that's when you're going to give up those catch-and-shoot 3s outside of transition. I think that's the other time they're most effective in finding their 3-point shooters.

It's one of those games where we're going to have to be able to guard our own. We're going to have to stick a little closer to shooters, and we're going to rely on the two people in the pick-and-roll to be able to guard that on our own.

**Q. You were just chuckling at Sienna up here trying to figure out what to say, what she's allowed to say. Having been through this so many times having such a veteran team, what's it like to have somebody that sort of reminds you, yeah, this is new and fun?**

CORI CLOSE: That's pretty much every day with Sienna Betts is new and fun. She is hilarious. I think that I knew some of our additions and what they were going to bring, especially on the court, but I had no idea Sienna and Gianna Kneepkens are so funny. They are hilarious.

Sienna, every day it's something new. Even we were announcing in film she was going to be here with Kiki. All of a sudden, she puts her head on Kiki's shoulder. It's just sort of -- I don't know, she's just silly in all things Sienna. That's actually one of the things I love the most about coaching her.

I think actually she is so hard on herself and she's so driven, I think her humor is actually a saving Grace for her. It's sort of a breathe moment. It's laughter. Because when she's not smiling and bringing joy, she's usually beating herself up for a mistake. As she continues to grow in that, I hope it doesn't have to be her escape, but I just have absolutely enjoyed Sienna so much.

I'm really enjoying watching her grow, and it is so fun to see -- this is my 33rd year in Division I coaching. I haven't been to the NCAA Tournament every one of those, but I've been to a lot of them. Moments like that when you get to see how new and fresh and fun this experience is, it keeps me young as well.

**Q. For the majority of the season, you're playing teams in your league. So when it comes to scouting, the players have a high level of familiarity. Now here's the tournament where it could be anybody, schools you guys just -- leagues you don't know anything about. I'm just wondering, in terms of the scout, how much more crucial that becomes as you advance? And in terms of the players, are they more focused in? Do they understand, boy, we really have to rely on this info because we just have nothing much to go on**

otherwise?

CORI CLOSE: It's interesting because I think I came from the Pac-12 and I know that the NCAA Tournament is going to mimic that format, even going to the Big Ten, which they have a Big Ten rule that you have to have two days before every game. So most Big Ten teams, I think, always do two-day preps. We have made a practice that, even though we have two days in between our first game one week and our second, that we only did a one-day prep on the second game.

I think we wanted to keep that sharp ability to prepare quickly. The way in which we administer our scouts from a staff perspective, as well as how we disseminate the information and have our players process that on that one-day prep, that is sort of our MO. So I feel very confident with that short turnaround time because we literally have been practicing it every week.

So the first part of your conversation, also, there's been a lot of challenges that people have talked about with conference realignment and all of those things, but one of the benefits being in the Big Ten is with 18 teams is the amount of styles of play you have to get good at adjusting to and playing against.

Congratulations to Minnesota, who had a big win on a buzzer beater today. I think it was Battle who hit it on their team. I was just thinking to myself about the varied styles that -- I think the SEC, they don't have as many teams, and I don't think they have as many varied styles of play. I think the Big Ten has everything, from pressing teams to half-court execution teams, with teams with a post presence, with teams that play four guards, and all of those things.

I think not only the one-day preps that we just practiced all the time, but also the varied styles of play in an 18-team conference, I think, really pays dividends this time of year.

**Q. As you guys were playing yesterday, your counterpart for Oklahoma State, Coach Hoyt, was courtside watching you guys play. Do you find it easier to scout a team live in person, or is it easier to scout them watching film?**

CORI CLOSE: I think it's a combination. I chose to watch it in the locker room the first game, the Princeton-Oklahoma State game, only because this is our home stadium. So it's harder for me to sit there and not have somebody come up and say hello -- which of course I love, you know.

But to protect myself let alone having other people have to

put up with me, I wanted to be so I could really focus. But I think it was the circumstances. If we were on the road, I would probably have been out next to the people who's responsible for the scout.

By the time we get to a game like that, we've already broken down ten games, and we're now just maybe checking for signal calls. We're making sure they didn't put anything new in. We're really tweaking at that point. We're not game planning at that point. That has pretty much been derived.

So I think it's just a supplemental thing and it's a comfort thing. I could not thank our video team and our assistant coaches more. I think they are so good at their jobs. There's a pair that work on each game. Yesterday was Madison Blevins and Soh, our assistant coach, Soh Matsuura. Today is Tony Newnan and Michaela Onyenwere. They're the pair, the scouting pair.

I just, the work they put in, it just sets me up to sort of show up and go, okay, what are we thinking here? How are we going to go about this? As an offensive, co-offensive coordinator, what kind of reads and actions are we preparing for? That's sort of how I approach it.

Probably more than you wanted. Sorry.

**Q. I'm wondering, you've talked so much about mental preparation all season. I'm just curious, March is so crazy because you have the ebbs and the flows of the tournament and then another tournament. How does it change round 1 to round 2? I know you guys are such a one game at a time team. How does that prep change as the tournament goes on?**

CORI CLOSE: I sort of even saw a difference in their eyes today when we were watching film. Remember we're coming out of final exams. We've had this incredible weather. I used to joke around with the coaches at UConn. CD, their associate head coach, everybody knows why they're coming to UConn, and it's not the weather.

I think there is actually something to be said of like it's go time. I think they felt that yesterday with, okay, we've had media. We've had selection show. We've had finals. We've had all these things happening. I think we were all not happy with how we started it.

But I think it was a really healthy jarring of what -- like this is a -- we are narrowing it in. This is a business trip, and everything else doesn't matter except our preparation. So I really do think -- I think there's an increased sort of urgency, appropriately so.



Sorry, one other thing about the mental side of the game since you said that. One of the things we talked about today -- Tasha Brown runs our mental conditioning program, and she is just spectacular. We were talking in our staff meeting about how they have more tools than they're accessing.

Yesterday adversity and disruptions of our rhythms, different things that happened before the game leading up to it, they have more tools in their tool box than they're accessing, and that's what we reminded them today. What does it look like for us to get to neutral when something comes in that's out of our control? What does it look like for us to take a deep breath, remember what our game plan is? How do we have those responses faster?

There's going to be adversity to every game. There's going to be something that happens. Tasha's challenge to our team today was remember the tools that you already have, that you've worked on, that you've earned, and let's see if we can access those quicker.

**Q. Coach, you've talked all year long about having the growth mindset and watching the team grow each and every day? If you had to pick one player who's grown the most this year, who would that be?**

CORI CLOSE: You're trying to get me in trouble now, aren't you? I think it's been -- I could pick a different person every week. I think there's so many. Like I have been so thrilled -- and I think that you guys haven't seen it as much -- but I might take Amanda Muse. It's just a hard thing because what I'm seeing is in practice every day, and what you guys are seeing is in the games every week.

I just think it's -- to me it's not about picking one person, it's about making sure that it's truly not just a core value that sits on a wall somewhere, growth mindset, but it's something that we truly live.

We always say that celebrate what you want to see more of and have accountability and don't allow the things that you don't want in your boat, so to speak. I think we want to celebrate growth all the time. I just want it to be not something that we give lip service to or a part of our mission statement, but it's a part of our behavioral habits all the time.

I think the fact that I can't really pick somebody out totally says that they're doing a pretty good job of that.

**Q. One more thing about Oklahoma State. You look at the numbers individually, their one and two year post presence. Akot is, I think, sixth in the nation in field goal percentage. Is there anything she does against**

**bigger opponents that you've seen that makes her crafty?**

CORI CLOSE: Well, she's not usually catching the ball in the -- well, we call it the war zone or at the rim. She's catching it in that high post area, and then she's really attacking downhill from that point, or she's really getting it off of rolls in their pick-and-roll offense, where she's getting pocket passes, where she can use her mobility. It's not a back to the basket hit you kind of thing. It's getting her on the move, which really plays to her strengths.

I think she's just really crafty. She's really got good footwork. She knows how to sort of avoid shot blockers. I think she's a really solid player. They've got some players -- you talked about her efficiency in the numbers. No. 6 has got -- 67 percent of her shots are midrange. Analytics would tell you that's not great, but she makes 50 percent of them. Now all of a sudden it's really good. She's so efficient. That forces you to play a little bit differently in the pick-and-roll when she's involved.

They have a lot of players who know who they are and where they're at their best, and they play to those strengths really well.

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