

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

Monday, March 23, 2026

Los Angeles, California, USA

Pauley Pavilion

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Gianna Kneepkens

Media Conference

UCLA - 87, Oklahoma State - 68

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

CORI CLOSE: First of all, I thought Oklahoma State gave us all the aggression and I thought they were a fierce and competitive and physical and just want to give them credit for a great game and a great year for them.

It's hard to put into words. If I look at you, then you're going to look at her, and we're going to pass it on?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah.

CORI CLOSE: You know, it's a weird feeling right now because we just -- we are so excited about having another 1-0 part of our season. So we're not really -- from a basketball perspective, these aren't where the tears come from. It's the way these seniors have affected our UCLA community, class, commitment, loyalty, selflessness. People are saying all the time, Oh, we've lost the true student-athlete. No, we haven't. These six haven't. They serve others. When I watched 'em just walk around that court, I told 'em in the locker room, We can talk about your wins and losses all day, but that will always pale in comparison to the way that you've affected this community, the way that you've touched people's hearts, the way that you've grown as young women. And they get to keep that forever, and I just am so humbled and thankful.

I was walking down the hall with these two, and I just said, you know, one year and three years, thankfully you chose



us the second time around. But it doesn't matter. The commitment is still so deep, and I couldn't be prouder of them, but I'm way more proud of who they have chosen to become and how they have impacted this community even more so than any wins and losses that we can talk about.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Lauren, what can you say about your performance? 35 points. It seemed like whenever the team needed you, you were just there and you were able to put the ball in the basket.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I think I was just working really hard today on getting seals, and my teammates did a really good job of finding me today. Some of those passes were absolutely insane. The trust that they have to throw that up there and just know that I'm going to catch it, I think that's just all the chemistry that we've been working on all season. So just really proud of how we moved the ball offensively. I thought we really executed today.

Q. Lauren, we talked about this the last game here at Pauley. What does it mean to you to have this wonderful game that you played tonight for us for your last time playing here?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I'm just really thankful. Like Coach Cori said, I mean, this community the minute that I transferred over here has just welcomed me with open arms. The fans have just been so supportive of me through my entire journey, through my mental challenges, through just basketball, everything. I feel like I've grown so much, and they have really taken care of me here.

Yeah, it's not even about basketball to me at this point. Like the people, like Coach Cori said, that we've been able to affect and just the difference that we've made, I think has been huge, and so for me, like, just to see all the people waving at us at the end of the game was really special and, yeah, so just really thankful.

Q. Gianna, you talked about you transferred to play around great players like Lauren, and she had 35 points, but she also opened up the lane where you



were able to knock down some big threes. Can you just talk about her impact on how it made your game better and having the opportunity to play with her this year.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, I think her impact has been incredible. She makes everyone better not just because of the basketball player she is, but the leader she is. She challenges us, she pushes us, she just wants what's best for the team. So, like, when people are getting tripled, she's not worried about, oh, like, can I get the points? She's seeing who is open so that we can score. So I just have had such a great time playing with Lauren and she's one of the biggest reasons I came here. So just super grateful to be part of this team.

Q. Obviously you transfer in the first year, and then to have all the success with this team and now to your final game at Pauley, what has been the whirlwind of that experience coming in here and ingratiating yourself with the team and with the community?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is kind of what Lauren said, but just so much gratitude. I have so much gratitude for my teammates for welcoming me from the first time I got here. I love these girls so much and they're going to be part of my life forever. I think that's really special. And that translates to on the court because we trust each other, we love each other, we fight for each other.

And then for the fans, just an absolute incredible season. They showed up for us throughout the whole season. When we step out there for the first time, when you hear them, it's just electric in there and, like, there's nothing that matches that feeling. So just so grateful and gratitude is the word of the night for me.

Q. I believe Coach had mentioned -- correct me if I'm wrong -- third-quarter lulls after the last game and it looked like there was one again tonight where the game got tight. How do you need to -- obviously, you're not going 5-0 when the other team is doing things to make things difficult, but how much do you need to avoid lulls like that as these games get tougher and tighter to not have a big lull where a team makes a run and kind of gets the game turned around?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I think that's why we do all the mental work outside of these games. Like, every single week once a week we're doing mental work with Coach T, and I feel like -- there was a podcast that -- where Gabs and Ki talked about how this team is just mentally really, really tough. And it has to do with moments like that where games might get tight, teams might go on runs, it's March,

it's going to happen, and we as a unit just need to come together and be connected and just communicate through it and hold each other accountable.

I think that's what makes this team so special is because we're just a very mature group of people who just know how to get the job done and that's just how basketball is. People are going to go on runs, but we just have to lock in and focus on what we need to do.

Q. Lauren, one thing you guys definitely corrected tonight was the slow start. You come out, scored the first six or nine points, and really had them on their heels from that point on. Can you just maybe -- I know you guys talked amongst yourselves and kind of self-corrected, but you really were able to put it to work tonight.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, I think we just learned our lesson. We don't want another halftime with Coach Cori walking in there (laughing). We're trying to avoid that at all costs. Yeah, no, I think -- I mean, I think it starts defensively. Like, we're going to score. Obviously, we know that. But I think just being the aggressors and taking things away is a really big point that we wanted to make this game, and I thought we did that from the very beginning. We just followed the scout really well, we executed, we made things hard.

So I feel like if we continue to do that during the tournament, we're going to be in a really good spot.

Q. You both mentioned the fans tonight, but Dwyane Wade and his wife were there with their 7-year-old daughter, and of course she wasn't the only child or little kid watching you guys tonight, but maybe what's the affect when you do look out in the stands and you see these little kids and they're super excited and they're looking up to you guys?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I mean, it means so much. I think it's really special because when we were little girls, we had people to look up to. So I think now that we have that opportunity, we just try to represent ourselves and this school very well. So I think it's really special to be in that position.

Q. Wondering if you can talk -- this is a very physical team, physical game. They just would not go away. Can you talk a little bit about what that does for you kind of in the next stage of the tournament, leaving home, and how that kind of prepares you to take on your next challenge?

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I feel like that's really expected

going into every single game. It's your last opportunity to leave it all on the floor. It's, like, you lose, you go home. So it's what's expected. We're going to be physical, other teams are going to be physical, but I think you just have to mentally show up and prepare yourself for that. Yeah, I mean, I can't really say anything else than that. But, like, it's March, so you just got to be ready for the physicality every single game.

Q. Lauren, I know you guys don't talk about individual stats or achievements like that, but talk a little bit about what it means to set a career high in scoring on your last shot in Pauley Pavilion?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Man, that's cool.

LAUREN BETTS: Yeah, I mean, that's really cool. I mean, I can't deny, like, that is really cool (laughing). I don't know, I think -- you know, I don't know. I feel like the points, they really don't mean anything to me. To me, like, I really just want to win games with this team. The fact that we won today is what matters most to me, and that we're moving on to the Sweet 16.

But of course, I mean, to do it with all of these fans here and this program and these girls, it means a lot. It means a lot to me. And this program is everything to me. To have my mom in the stands and her friends, that was really special. But, yeah, again, I can't thank this program enough. It's genuinely changed my life coming here and I'm just forever grateful for UCLA, so it's really special.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse you to the locker room and take questions for Coach.

Q. What's it like for you watching these amazing young ladies play their last game here at Pauley with you?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, you know, I was talking to the announcers yesterday and the people that were doing the talent for the TV broadcast, and I started to talk about the last time in Pauley I was going to be able to be at half court before starting lineups and have Gabs run on out. Her smile is infectious. It's like, the best day ever when she gets to play in Pauley Pavilion. And I got emotional with them just realizing how much they have committed. Just having a vision and wanting to execute that doesn't mean anything if you don't have incredible, courageous young women willing to make uncommon choices. Our hopes are yielding uncommon results. It just is a great joy.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the lulls, third-quarter lulls as well.

CORI CLOSE: Way to go, Ben. No, it's good.

Q. Is it just basketball? Obviously, teams are doing stuff to make things difficult, they're going to make runs as well, but is it a concern?

CORI CLOSE: No, I don't think it's a concern in terms of just a theme, but I think every game teaches you something. And I thought, actually, more so than the lulls -- because we scored the ball. I mean, we scored it 21, 25, 18, 23, you know, in terms of scoring. But where our defense had lapses, where we couldn't get stops, and we were just trading baskets, and that was actually a bigger concern.

I think the second concern for me is how we couldn't make adjustments to stop what they were doing. That's from a coaching perspective as well as a player perspective out on the floor. I think my second part is I thought we have been very composed and poised all year long. I thought there was a couple of times where we let a missed call by a referee or a frustration on, you know, a switch or a miscommunication or whatever affect the next play. And I didn't think our next play speed was as good as it has been, and it affects you. It's really quick, but all of a sudden you're not the tougher, more together team, and all of a sudden it's a 6-0 run or it's something that happens in the game where they get a little momentum going.

So I think that's what I told 'em in the locker room is, We have to treat this like we've treated games all year long is go, Oh, yeah, I missed that there. I got to be better the next game. I think we just can't get tired of doing it right and learning from every single game. So I did think we didn't have as good of next-play speed as we have had earlier and we need to address that, but I just think we needed to have our defense be a better anchor for us tonight, and I think that would have made things easier.

Q. How do you balance the emotions of playing your last game in Pauley with also it being a business trip trying to get to the Sweet 16?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah. Well, I actually don't think -- I don't think the emotion leading up to the game -- we were pretty businesslike coming into this game. We knew that it was going to be really special for those six seniors to have that moment, especially for Kiki and Gabs, but that being said, this is a very focused team. We understand what's at stake, we understand that every game is a 1-0 game and you have to make sure that you're taking care of your business. So I think I want them to celebrate this moment, I want them to have the joy of what they have given this community, but I'm pretty confident they understand the assignment.

Q. Following up on what you said earlier, what do you think has to go into being able to make those adjustments during the lulls and become the the tougher, more together team, as you put it?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think, you know -- and I always see it more clearly once I watch the film tonight and see, okay, where maybe I could have called a timeout there or maybe we, you know, could have switched defenses or, you know -- I thought maybe we could have trapped some of those ball screens, but I didn't want to give up catch-and-shoot threes. So in the end, I made some decisions because even if they're making hard shots, our number one goal this game was to limit catch-and-shoot threes.

So even though they were making twos, they were making hard twos. I didn't think they could close the gap completely if we kept 'em off the three-point line. So I would be guessing if I told you I had a clear answer to your question right now, but that's exactly what my job is to go study tonight.

Q. You've got Minnesota next. Big Ten opponent. You handled 'em during the regular season. When you are going to -- often in the tournament, you play these schools you've never played before, you don't know well, but here you got somebody you do know. Is there any kind of an inherent advantage, whether it's in video, scouting, familiarity, that -- you know, how do you sort of approach somebody that you handled before?

CORI CLOSE: Well, you know, I think that -- I don't know if it's an advantage or disadvantage. I think also you could flip it that they know you better. I just think that each game is going to have some requirements if you want to move on. I do think they may become a little clearer to the team. When we play Oklahoma State, they're really trusting us to, okay, you guys have done the work to scout, but in this case, they have experienced it too.

So I do think there's something to that. But I think they're playing extremely well, and I think Dawn's done a great job with their team. I think they're running really high right now. They're very confident. I fully expect it to be a great battle. I do want to make a point, though, about the guidelines or rules in the seeding and selection. Everyone kept asking me if it bothered me that we were or were not the No. 1 overall seed. I couldn't care less.

But you know what does bother me? Is that the No. 1 and No. 2 overall seeds are not being rewarded because of a guideline that you can't play a person in your conference in the regional finals. That is an antiquated, poor rule that

advantages the wrong teams and the people who haven't done the work. That bothers me way more. And now it's okay, though, that we play a conference foe in the Sweet 16, but not in the Elite 8, and especially if it disadvantages the No. 1 overall seed and the No. 2 overall seed. Like, you know, it wouldn't have mattered. We would be better off if we were lower.

So that actually is the part that I hope they will change down the road. Really, if you're trying to go win a National Championship, it really shouldn't matter. You got to play everybody eventually. So I'm not complaining about that, but I do hope that they will learn from the systems that we're in and now that we have conference realignment and you have 18 teams in a conference, and -- that is a dumb rule, in my opinion.

Q. I want to ask you, Lauren, in her thing in the Athlete --

CORI CLOSE: Players' Tribune?

Q. Yeah. Were you aware she was -- and maybe you've been asked this before. Were you aware she was going to do this?

CORI CLOSE: I wasn't.

Q. Okay.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah.

Q. What do you think of what she did, the courageousness? Because when you talk about yourselves and your inner feelings and everything, it's a courageous thing. And do you feel she's gotten sort of a burden? Is there a freedom she has now because she's done that?

CORI CLOSE: Yes, I think it's exactly what's she's had. I think she's found a really deep purpose. And when you can use your pain for great purpose and other centeredness to have an incredible legacy in the lives of others, that's an incredible gift. But it's a gift that she's worked really, really hard for. I think it started last year when she did the first article and shared her story. I think she got a glimpse, but it was still someone else telling her story.

And I think she would say that the writer did a great job, but it still was someone else's perception of her story. But even still, the incredible impact it had was unmistakable. I've told this story, but there's several other like it. We were at Penn State. There was this young girl, probably -- maybe middle school/early high school, and she waited

and waited and she went up to Lauren and just said, Your article last year saved my life.

And Lauren came in and she had these tears, and I said, are you okay? What happened? She goes, They're good tears, Coach. They're good tears. This little girl just told me my courage to share my story saved her life.

And that was just the beginning. And then I was walking down the ramp with her, I think it was yesterday, and I said, Hey, when did you start with this Players' Tribune story and what was that like? And she says, Now I'm getting to tell the story of my healing. And I think that was really freeing for her that she feels like she's in a different place now. And it's almost a celebration of how far she's come and then she's continuing to impact people in the process as well.

Q. How do you keep the pressure off a team that everyone is saying this is the greatest UCLA women's basketball team in history?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, you know, I honestly saw a little bit of that in the second half. I felt like we were playing a little bit tight. Once we got really going and I felt like we were -- we started to play not to make a mistake. I didn't think we dictated the same way we started. And I do think we've got to be aware that that's outside, and we have to be very insular in terms of how we define what this experience is.

I've said this a lot to them all year long. I don't care what game, I hope it's the last game, but we will not allow one 40-minute game to define your entire impact or experience. We just are not going to allow it to be defined that way. And I think we have to continually remind ourselves the outside world can say whatever they want. They need to play with freedom and joy and surrender the outcomes and be completely focused on the process and being present for every moment.

But it's hard. I mean, it's hard for me. I don't want to let 'em down. I want to be ready to be the leader they need me to be. I want to free them up to be dream chasers. And I want them to master their craft at the highest of levels. But I've also been taught that competitive greatness is a byproduct, and you need to have a lot of things go your way. So I want them to just play with freedom and joy knowing they have chosen to be elite teammates and knowing they have chosen to master their craft at the highest levels of everything that's under their control, and let the chips fall where they may.

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