

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Texas A&M-Corpus Christi vs USC

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

JuJu Watkins

Rayah Marshall

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined today by University of Southern California guard JuJu Watkins and center forward, Rayah Marshall.

Q. JuJu, what's your comfort level starting out here at home where you know the shooting backgrounds, you know the building? Things you might have to think about at other locations you don't have to think about, and you can focus on the actual game itself?

JUJU WATKINS: There is definitely a home advantage with every one seed, so I'm grateful to be here, but also I'm aware of the time of year it is. I mean, really, you know, anything can happen, so just making sure that we're locked in is our main focus.

Q. Rayah, you mentioned at the Pac-12 Tournament that JuJu was getting you guys hyped up at halftime and a funny story you told with that. What has been like seeing her preparation throughout this week and her impact and leadership she has as a freshman on this group?

RAYAH MARSHALL: Exceedingly high. That's what we expect from her, a star-level player coming into her first March Madness. That's big-time. From top to bottom everyone is excited and we're ready to compete.

Q. JuJu, what's your preparation been like throughout this week? Has it been different than the mentality that you have approached this run with or same?



JUJU WATKINS: I think there is definitely more urgency, just knowing what's on the line. We got a good amount of time off, so body's all rested, so I'm just ready. I've been very -- a lot of anticipation, so I'm ready.

Q. How is the ankle, better?

JUJU WATKINS: Ankle is great, yeah, it's better.

Q. JuJu, being at home obviously you got a lot of family and friends. Has that been kind of a thing where they're getting so excited and do you have to kinda -- or do they try to keep themselves calm so you stay calm? How does that all work out?

JUJU WATKINS: I'm not sure. I try to limit as much, like, basketball talk off the court, so really I'm just chilling. I have isolated myself a little bit from outside distractions and stuff like that. I've just been in my room, really.

Q. Rayah, you have the three grad transfers who have brought the maturity, the experience. Just talk about their influence on you guys and the leadership, especially at a time now where the pressure really does amp up.

RAYAH MARSHALL: We actually have four; three from Ivies and one from -- is it TCU? We're fortunate enough to have three of them start, and all three of them are competitors, all three of them are verbal on the court, all three of them are paving a road that's necessary for us to win.

And Kenzie, for example, like we come out at practice, she's bringing that same fire that she brings pregame and KP is knocking down shots, KD is on the boards -- rebounds. So all three of them, they are valuable to our team, and in this preparation they're just on top of everything, whether it's reminding us to go over a ball screen or just doing the proper things to get reps done. They're doing their jobs and their role is great.

Q. Rayah, you obviously had a big impact in the Pac-12 Tournament and talked at times in a conversation with an assistant about getting your



mentality right and getting amped up for the final stretch of the season. What do you think is important about the mentality that you are trying to bring into March Madness, as someone dominant in the paint and trying to anchor this team?

RAYAH MARSHALL: For me as a third-year leader for my team, I just try and be as consistent as possible. For my team, just finding that balance that we really need, holding myself and everyone else accountable. So when I'm coming in here I'm just buying into the scout and what the coaches is telling me, as far as my role and what needs to be done, and I go out and execute that.

Q. JuJu, you have faced Pac-12 defenses for a couple months that have been geared to stop you and faced a lot of those scouts similarly. What's it been like preparing for this team that you haven't seen this year, and that there hasn't been a lot of film on Texas A&M-Corpus Christi?

JUJU WATKINS: That's the surprise element of basketball. Any game you don't really know what the other team is coming with, so it's just important for me to go in with the right mind-set for me, knowing that I'm going to have to make adjustments within the game and try to make them as quick as possible.

I would say it's part of the game. I'm not sure what any team is going to do, really, so just making sure I'm locked in when I step foot on the court.

Q. There have been a few games this year especially through Pac-12 play where it looked like you were figuring out defenses on the fly, and maybe got off to kind of a cold start and then started to heat up. What's that process been like for you as a freshman, having the freedom to take those shots and start slow and figure things out sort of on the fly?

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah. I mean, I'm grateful to have a coaching staff and a team that believes in me and trusts in my abilities, so -- I mean, I'm constantly just trying to figure it out and -- but the priority is winning. So whatever I need to do outside of scoring, on the defensive end and different stuff like that just to make sure we win, I mean, that's all I can really do.

Q. JuJu, when you were in high school I'm guessing you watched the tournament. What was it about March Madness that you really enjoyed or that you looked forward to and got that excited knowing that, hey, there's going to be a time where I'm going to be able to be part of this, too?

JUJU WATKINS: I mean it's always been to me the most exciting time in basketball. So just to be able to finally be a part of it and know that it's going to be a challenge. I mean, it's the best part but also the most challenging part of the season, so I think it really just makes it -- I think that's why it's so competitive and so much attention on it, because it's truly the most exciting part.

I'm just happy to be a part of it. I really don't know what to expect, so I'm just going in like -- yeah. I didn't answer your question very well. Sorry.

Q. Rayah, you guys obviously have had the huge support of the alums this season coming out and really being there for you guys. Just wondering, I know you had something with them on Sunday. Have they given you guys a message going into this? What feelings have they conveyed to you guys?

RAYAH MARSHALL: First and foremost they're winners, so anything they're telling us, our ears are open for, and one thing about it they instill a lot of confidence in all of us. They are supporting us, they come to our games so they're watching, and they know what they're talking about.

They were great basketball players back in their time so their IQ hasn't left, honestly. So their love for the game, their passion, they're instilling that into us, and they're telling us they know what it's like to have been in Final Four games, and they have lived March Madness. So all the words and encouragement they are giving us is honestly very helpful, and we're grateful for it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. We are joined by University of Southern California Head Coach Lindsay Gottlieb. We will start with an opening statement from Coach.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming. It's great to have you all in Galen Center. March Madness never gets old. Really grateful to be in this tournament. It's the greatest sporting event, I think, in the world. So to have this opportunity to play in it is something I never take for granted, and to do it with this team I think is particularly meaningful, because it's been a really special year, and we're ready to play.

I think a lot of the team sitting in the locker room would rather be playing today. It just feels like it's been a wait, but we will have a great practice today and kick it off tomorrow against an excellent team that has earned their right to be here.

Q. (No microphone.)

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Absolutely. We actually just talked about it in the locker room. I'm wearing the Nike Trojan Energy shirt, and I told them all the Nike teams have these -- whatever mascot or name, energy, so how do we differentiate ourselves? For us it's what we have been able to capture, and that is a lightness about us, a feet right where we are and enjoy playing, and at the same time, you know, with a toughness and an urgency, right next to the joy.

So we message it. I'm very transparent with my messaging with the players of what is important, of who we have to be, so, yeah, we have kind of talked about it, we've kind of manifested that, and I think the players own that with their actions every day, and I've been closely watching to make sure we continue with that, even as the stage gets bigger, and that's what the goal is.

Q. Lindsay, just curious, McKenzie talked about there being growing pains at times this year, just with the Ivies, a lot of individual players accepting and reframing different versions of their roles and understanding what's a good game for Kayla. She is not taking 10, 13 shots a game anymore, maybe it's 4 or 5 and reframing that. What has been your process as a coach in messaging to get those players to buy into individualized roles around JuJu and reframing that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I wouldn't call it growing pains, I would call it growth. That's what a team is supposed to do.

We came in with almost a brand new team this year, like a lot of different pieces and people in different spots and roles. That's what determines how good you are over the course of a season is how do you adapt? How do you continue a growth trajectory as other people maybe plateau. How do you handle adversity?

So I think that circumstances have forced us to continue to get better. So I think that, you know, what KD was injured for some of the year, we played a little more small ball, you know, with four guards.

Then KD coming back and really hitting her stride was almost like getting another player, another weapon, and we could play differently. I think the ability to show that we can play Clarice with Rayah at times and go big. I just think that's what a college season brings, especially playing in a league like the Pac-12 where you are challenged so consistently on a night in, night out basis but also differently. It's forced us to continue to grow, and that's what we've done.

We never sat down and said, hey, this is what JuJu can do,

so this is what I need you to do, or you to do. They're hoopers that really play off each other, and we've seen so many different game plans that they all just want to win.

So we have kind of figured it out in real time and then watched film and then tried to prepare them for what's next, and then something that comes next is different, so we adapt again. But it's really been a cohesive effort to become the best team we can become, and now we feel really confident in that.

Q. You mentioned KD and just how important she has become, and Beth calls her Bab-Bam, I think, something like that. You talk about all the time how it doesn't necessarily show up in stats, but how important is kind of the missing piece has she been to this program in the stretch down the season?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: When we tell the story of this year, and I tell hopefully my grandchild something one day about that Pac-12 Tournament championship, KD's effort in three straight games was, to me, as phenomenal as anything I've seen. I know the story that -- her story isn't going to be the lead but her 16 rebounds, including -- can you call it the game-winning rebound. The one where she kicked it out, and we got one more for Kenzie to hit that three?

She just did a lot of heroic things that probably aren't considered heroic, so she has been phenomenal. But also she gives us an element, right, she can guard guards, she can guard bigs, she can punish a smaller four. She can stretch the floor and pass and get other people involved. She is just a really, really good player, and she has added an element for us that's incredibly important, and she has done it really consistently here over the last six weeks.

Q. Lindsay, in the last week or so since the tournament ended, and now you're ramping up to obviously start this tournament, what have you sort of seen with JuJu? She was just in here saying she doesn't know what to expect. Obviously she is being shown as one of the faces of this event, and there is a lot of pressure on her, because of how well she has played this season. How are you keeping an eye on her and just in the hours here leading up to tip-off?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, it's remarkable what this young woman has done and what she has handled and the kind of grace with which she has done it. I've talked to a lot of people about her in a lot of different ways. But even just looking back at what she faced in the Pac-12 final with this created defense to be all about her, and we win with other people stepping up.

With her steadiness of demeanor, it's not an act; it's who

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

she is. I had a really good talk with her yesterday about, you know, I read this great article about Caitlin Clark and kind of everything she went through in her trajectory to be who she is now.

To kind of see JuJu going through it in realtime, like, she's just really well equipped to handle what's in front of her, and I think that's a testament to her, to her small circle, you know, her family, her people.

So a couple things. Coming off that weekend in Vegas she needed rest, as did a number of our players but physically what she had been through, so we gave her a bunch of rest. Then she and I watched a bunch of film. I actually had one of my staff cut every single kind of coverage she has faced, so it was a lot, and it was fun to watch. And just kind of say, okay, we faced this and this and this, because I just want to give her as many answers as I can before she takes the exam, so to speak, and just understand that she has handled everything, and we've handled stuff, and there is nothing people can throw at us that she wouldn't be ready for, and so it's time to just go play.

She has been terrific. I've tried to check in and say are you feeling any pressure or this, that and the next thing, and you heard her say it, she has never been part of March Madness. She is just excited. And the gauntlet she has been through in this league have prepared her and prepared her team, and a lot of people have her back, and so I think she'll be ready.

Q. How long was that video? Of her facing those coverages?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Very long, a lot of clips. It's really -- yeah, we've watched it in parts of various places on the floor that we get her the ball or playing off of different coverages and stuff, but a little bit of a visual of what the court looks like in various coverages, what, you know, post players are doing on drops and hedges and traps, and all the things that she might face.

Q. You talked about the lightness from the players, I think. Aaliyah brings so much of that joy even when she is not playing. How do you think her, her story, what she's been through, how she maintained that lightness has kind of like projected on to the team even if she is not contributing on the court as much right now?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: It's part of our fabric, and I would say for much of the year, even though you don't necessarily see our box scores, on the court she has been contributing for us in practice, though she has dealt with an injury for the last couple weeks, where she hasn't actually

been on the court as much, but she is part of the fabric of us.

She is incredibly joyous, but she is also important in terms of her messaging. She is a "hoop head." She understands basketball, so she is really good about chiming in from a basketball standpoint when we need to lock in, or giving advice, and she's also just really understands what a winning team looks like, and that's having a lot of people who are into it, and invested, and she has been phenomenal.

I don't know that she or the players kind of think about the big picture all the time as much as I do, but I walk in here and especially seeing the clips of the documentary that's going to come out, I mean, she is a walking miracle. We don't take that for granted, I don't take that for granted, and to have her as part of us, we wouldn't be us without her.

Q. Hi Coach. Just want to ask you about your family a little bit, specifically Jordan. How much of the game do your kids now recognize? Do they have any idea of the magnitude of what's going on? Just kind of what that's like for you as a mom when you look back and you know you've got that family support behind you?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: The family support means everything. I mean, I could go on about that, but my husband, Patrick, how many partners, husbands, when I get a job opportunity to go to Cleveland says, yep, let's pick up the family and move to Cleveland because how can you turn down the NBA and then say, now back to LA for a job.

So anything I have done here, we've done, this team has done, that happens here doesn't happen without my family, so I appreciate you asking that. Jordan, in particular, is almost seven, and you asked how much does he get? He can write a better scouting report than half of us in this room.

He knows players. He can mimic shot forms. He's -- he's locked in. We have had to really like explain like the Pac-12 versus the national tournament, and I said no at this point whenever -- whoever loses, their season is over. Whoever wins, they keep going. And he's like, no matter what we will always have the Pac-12 Championship, and I said true, but we've got more to go for!

So he's hilariously into it, and a bunch of his friends are now, too, and coming to games and stuff. He loves women's basketball, you know, the NBA. Those are probably his two favorite things. I don't think he totally gets men's college basketball as much, but, yeah, he's really into it.

My daughter is now 18 months. The two things she says clearly around basketball are SC and JuJu, those two things, amongst the other words that she has, so it's very fun to have them be a part of it. It certainly takes village. We have a great childcare team. Like I said, my husband as well. The team has been amazing about including them in our ride, so thank you for asking that.

Q. When you talk about the coverages that JuJu is going to face, there have been a lot of times in the Pac-12 that you could see her visibly figuring out defenses at the start of the game and maybe she shot colder to start and then shots started dropping later. You talked about how you don't want to reign in anything she does. In a one-game elimination setting now does that mentality continue, if she starts trying to figure things out you still don't want to reign that in?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, we're just trying to win basketball games. I trust her reads. Like, to me I don't see the same thing I saw early on. She is making the right play again and again. I actually had a number of people say to me, watching that Stanford game it was remarkable how she didn't look frustrated at all. The greatest women's -- I should say the greatest college basketball coach of all time, Tara VanDerveer put four people on her, and we're like okay, next person, gotta figure out what we need to do to win.

There is more of that. I think there is a confidence for the whole team in which, you know, we've got at this point too many weapons out there and too many good players to only take away one thing, and that's what I'm looking for, is all of us trying to make the winning play at the right time.

I think JuJu needs to be aggressive. When she is aggressive, all the other reads flow from that, but who knows I think people might -- given what we have done over the last several weeks, people might look at it differently and say how do you leave Kayla Padilla and McKenzie Forbes open? How do you play Rayah one-on-one in the post? You've gotta figure it out now.

So we might see something, we have not seen in a while, because that's just -- people have to now make choices on the defensive end. I just trust that we will make the right reads as the game goes on, and that's what we're trying to do.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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