

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

**USC Trojans**

**Lindsay Gottlieb**

**JuJu Watkins**

**India Otto**

**McKenzie Forbes**

Media Conference

USC 87, Texas A&M Corpus Christi 55

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the University of Southern California.

We will start with an opening statement from the head coach.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Hi, everyone. Thank you for being here. This crowd I think speaks to the growth of women's basketball, to the excitement around our team that our players have earned. It means a lot. We appreciate the coverage.

First of all, I want to credit Texas A&M Corpus Christi for winning a championship, for having 22 wins on the year, bringing a whole lot of fight in here, a lot of pride. I thought they represented themselves really well and challenged us.

I'm happy to get through the first one. It had been a while since we played. I have players who were eager to get going again. I think it was a good one for us. When you look at the numbers, a team that really disrupts you with zones and traps, 25 assists, 12 turnovers, speaks well to us. We obviously started hot.

We have things to work on, too, which I know we'll get back to that tomorrow. But really proud of our team. I think, as I've said before, JuJu handles the weight of everything with just a grace that you can't really describe. I thought she



had a terrific debut here, made all the right decisions.

Kenzie is playing, as well, as virtually any guard in the country in terms of leadership and knocking down shots.

I'm proud that India Otto is in here because there's no one as responsible for building this program as Otto. The way the team reacts when she's out there just shows the character she has, the huge impact she's had on our players.

Good day for us. We'll get back to work and have another chance to play a game on Monday night, which we're really grateful for.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open we questions for players.

**Q. What is it like to finally get this over with, the first game, for your program?**

McKENZIE FORBES: It feels good. I think, like coach hinted at, we were definitely itching to play. Had essentially two weeks of practice. Even yesterday I was, I feel like everyone is playing besides us.

Yeah, definitely feels good to get it under our belt. The crowd was awesome today. I think it really affects us, as you can see out there. Feels good.

**Q. JuJu, one under your belt. Talk about after getting this win how excited you are to go through this journey and what advice have you gotten from Cheryl Miller about what it takes to make it through this journey?**

JuJu WATKINS: I mean, this is like the most exciting time in basketball so I'm just grateful to be a part of it. I think there's a lot on the line that really gives us a lot of energy and momentum going into the game.

I'm just excited, as this is my first run. Whatever I need to do to help out the team, I'm going to do it.

As far as advice that I've gotten from G.O.A.T., she trusts in my mentality. I think we're similar in some ways as far



as just the competitiveness to want to win. She's just always encouraged me, encouraged me never to lose that. I'm just here trying to compete with my team.

**Q. You're dependable scorers. The defense was highlighted, seven blocks in the first quarter, three steals. How did that set the tone defensively to get out to that really good start?**

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, it's funny you say that because I think we probably felt like we could have been a lot better defensively.

Yeah, obviously JuJu is a great shot-blocker. I try to be as active as I can defensively 'cause when we're running out in transition, I think that's when we're playing our best. We need to string some stops together so we could get the pace back, which I thought we did a good job of in the third quarter, so...

**Q. JuJu, the single-season scoring record which you got tonight, I'm sure you and Cheryl have talked about it. What does that mean to you? What has she talked to you about?**

JuJu WATKINS: I wasn't even aware that happened. I'm just grateful, honestly. Coach has so much trust in me. I'm grateful for that. My teammates have so much trust in me.

I'm just grateful to be in that mention and to be part of the Trojan legacy.

**Q. JuJu, I feel like we always ask India about you. I'd like to ask you about India. What is it like seeing her have this moment?**

JuJu WATKINS: I was more excited for Otto. Those are the best points I've seen all season (smiling). I was more excited for her than the win. Well, no, I'm not going to say that (laughter). That's far.

She deserves it, bro. We see her score every day in practice. So to see her come out and just, I don't know, she lit up the crowd tonight. Congrats, bro.

**Q. India, you've been through this program for five years. A lot of ups and downs. To have a moment like tonight where you see this crowd all cheering for you, what does that mean?**

INDIA OTTO: I think honestly words fall short to describe what that feeling meant to me. I literally got goose bumps after I hit that three. Coming down, to hear the crowd...

I've been here for five years. My first year, no one was in

the stands. Last year we went to Blacksburg and played, didn't make it past the first round. Incredible to make it past this round. You don't take those moments for granted.

It was incredible. That is a core memory for me for sure. A culmination of everything I put into this program the last five years, it was really, really special.

**Q. JuJu, you committed one turnover in the game, the first play of the game. What's going through your mind?**

JuJu WATKINS: Oh, my God.

**Q. How do you fight the feeling of, Here we go again?**

JuJu WATKINS: What do you mean? When I turned it over?

**Q. Yes.**

JuJu WATKINS: I give myself a little grace. It was, like, the first play. I haven't played in two weeks. Okay, let me get it back.

That's crazy, yeah. That's good news, one turnover (smiling).

**Q. JuJu, now that you've gotten your first March Madness game out of the way, what was it like? What do you take away from the experience moving forward?**

JuJu WATKINS: I think it's just important to have confidence. I have a lot of confidence in this team. It's a lot on the line. At the end of the day I trust that my teammates and I are going to get the job done because we put in so much work.

But honestly, I didn't know what to expect. Still don't really know what to expect. I'm just here for the ride, knowing what I need to do every game. I'm just going to give all that I can and hopefully that ends with the result that we want.

**Q. McKenzie, you're the only one on the team that has NCAA tournament experience. How do you get the team settled down to face Kansas, which is going to be quite the battle on Monday?**

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, for sure. I think we have a group. Obviously, I'm the only one with tournament experience. We've been battle tested. We had the double overtime game at Arizona, had to pull that one out. Come down, turn around, SU. Double overtime first UCLA in



Vegas. Turn around and play Stanford. No easy matches back to back.

In a way, that kind of like rapidly matured us. I think, yeah, this team is really hungry. I don't think we really have trouble kind of getting people focused back in. I think this team wants to win so bad, we know this is our shot.

I think it takes everyone. Everyone up here helps in leading the team in that way, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, girls.

We'll continue with questions for coach.

**Q. What was going through your mind as the game started?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, we're not unique to have two weeks. Probably less than some people who didn't play all the way through their conference championship game.

I think there's a balance of excitement, nerves, energy. Once that ball goes up, I'm enamored by the crowd. We never take it for granted how this community has come out for us, for this team. The change that's happened so rapidly, it's so amazing. The feeling of the building puts me at ease 'cause then it's just our team playing a game. You get into the moment. You try to make adjustments. Make sure I give the players a chance to be as successful as possible.

**Q. What do you take from the NBA to come into a situation like this, the highest level in the world, what do you bring into your situation here at USC?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: There's a lot of things. To do something for 20 years, coach women's college basketball, then pivot and go to the NBA, we probably don't have enough time to tell you how life-changing that was for me, how much it expanded my mind.

Specific to your question, I think there's two major things. The first is that coming back to college basketball at a time when NIL and the transfer portal and player autonomy kind of has exploded, maybe my mindset was already a little bit more there. I'm kind of more progressive in terms of just wanting players to have rights and abilities.

Having spent time in the NBA where you just have to understand that this is the player's career. Of course, they're trying to make money, advance their career. At the same time it doesn't work unless your locker room is about what impacts winning.

I think that's translated really well, the experiences I had there. Watching J.B. Bickerstaff really manage that, of how you handle a locker room, how those things can happen at the same time where you care about winning but also you care about individual player's goals.

The second thing is the spacing and the actions we run, the type of offense we want to play. Obviously, if you throw a player like JuJu into the mix and McKenzie, I can do more NBA-style things. I would say the mentality and the offensive spacing and actions that we try to run.

**Q. It's early with JuJu in her career, passing the single-season scoring mark with Cheryl. When I call her a generational talent so far, what is your response to that?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: You'd be crazy if you didn't call her that. I haven't been afraid to talk about how good we think JuJu is, especially with what's going on in real-time here. When you guys said she broke the single-season scoring record, that's crazy for any freshman. At USC where the woman she surpasses is literally the best basketball player of all time. Cheryl's career was cut short by injury.

I just think we're watching something really spectacular happen with JuJu. I was on some call the other day where I said, we can analyze stats, we can analyze turnovers, shooting efficiency, what have you, but to look at the overarching thing of the impact she's had on a program, she makes others around her better.

Not with just she has attention, she kicks for a three for somebody else, but she makes those around her be. I believe there's a greater confidence in our locker room all the time 'cause the way JuJu carries herself. There's a striving for excellence. Whether she says it or not, she impacts those around her who want to achieve greatness.

We have other terrific players. We would not be here without India, Kenzie Forbes, I could go on and on. In terms of the impact she's had on this program, I don't know if there's a player that's had it in their freshman year on a program like ever. So I think we can recognize that, as well.

**Q. Specifically tonight, you mentioned yesterday you went through and dissected every single coverage that she's faced, JuJu, this year. Tonight looked like she was playing measured, making a lot of reads. How have you seen her progress as a passer, an overall engine of the offense?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I think we've seen a lot of

improvement. I think tonight, if she shoots the three ball better tonight, it probably looks like one of her best games on the offensive end because I thought she attacked when it was time to attack, she kicked when it was time to kick. Shot pullup, she got to the rim, took open threes. I think she's continued to improve.

It's funny, you mention the first play of the game, I went straight to an iso to see what they were going to do. I can go back to that, I can go to something else. We definitely understand we can put her in spots on the floor and she's going to make the right read. A couple times I put her on the post, I think she had great passes. She can understand spots on the floor now.

This team threw a lot of various looks at us, like the traps and stuff. You just got to make plays out of it. Other people really made plays as well. Forbes shot it well. Rayah finished when it was time for her to do so. A lot of the defensive schemes we see are because what teams are planning to do around JuJu.

**Q. I think it's obvious to anyone who spent time around this team that it's truly a family. We all got to see that tonight with the way the team reacted to India's buckets. How do you carry that with you through this run? How special and unique is it?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think what I've talked with our team about, this is a unique situation that we're in in terms of I think we've played this whole year to kind of show people who we are and establish who we are. Now we're sitting with a 1 seed.

What I've talked with them over these last 10 days about is keeping the joy that we have while also playing with a sense of urgency. I think that's what you saw in the Pac-12 tournament. I don't think we've played with the weight of the world on our shoulders. We have played like we have a lot of fun together and we love one another.

But then with an urgency that we often are the toughest team out there, out-rebounding people. You can't just be loose and happy, you got to be loose and happy with legs behind it and how tough we're going to be.

That's what we want to keep. When you do that, people throw around the term 'family', but it's these players every day showing up and buying in. Like I said, you can't fake how they feel about Otto. That's because Otto has been that person for the entire year every single day. I think that's when those real bonds and stuff come.

I think it's a real strength of ours. It's not to say that other teams don't have it. I don't know. For us, we carry that as

a confidence builder. We have what we need here. We're in it for the right reasons. We want to play as long as we can.

Kansas is going to pose a ton of issues on Monday. They're a really good team. We got to be ready for that because joy alone and togetherness alone doesn't get stops. We have to get a scouting report. I think the players understand that.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports