

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Kansas vs USC

Monday, March 25, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

## USC Trojans

## Lindsay Gottlieb

## McKenzie Forbes

## JuJu Watkins

## Clarice Uche Akunwafo

### Media Conference

USC - 73, Kansas - 55

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

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Thanks for being here. First off, I just really want to credit Kansas for one heck of a season. The way they finished winning -- I don't know exactly sure what it is now, but 8 of 10 down the stretch or something to make the tournament, the way they came back against Michigan, says a lot about the coaching staff and Brandon Schneider and his staff and also the makeup of that team. I know they won the NIT last year and to have just about everyone returning and adding a terrific freshman, like, they put together a really good season and want to congratulate them. I know it's hard when it ends.

For us, I don't know if there's enough words. I'm elated, I'm joyed, I'm proud -- overjoyed, I'm proud. For this to be the last time that our senior group is playing in this building I just -- I want them to understand how special it was out here. I cannot thank our fans and our administration and the people who put this on, I think Galen was a great host. It's not easy to do that. There's a lot of work behind the scenes. And the fans showed up and showed out. It was electric both games and I just -- it means so much. I don't know if they understand it, because I sat with people in that office when I first got the job and they said, no one comes to games. I literally had a parent say, well, another coach said, why would you go there when they only get X number of fans, and I said, you know, it's going to take us a little bit,



but we're going to get fans in here and other people are still -- and then what are they going to say. And here we are. So I'm proud of that.

Getting to the Sweet 16 is hard and this team earned that. I couldn't be more proud. I thought today was our team on display. We are a team, right? I'm glad that the country got to see that. Ju is spectacular. They had to change and go to a zone because of her attacking early on. I thought we came and made big play after big play, we shot the three really well, Kenzi and JU and KP. And we found a way. When I say a team, we always say Rayah is our go-to, right? But we also have Clarice and for her to come in tonight in a critical moment and give us the boost that she did, we are all so proud of her because we see it every day in practice, and she plays her role to a T, and sometimes that's less minutes and sometimes that's more minutes. But she has become this consistent force for us, so for the world to see that was really awesome also.

And I'll stop talking now so you can ask questions of the players, but I'm really proud of 'em and I'm thrilled for this program and the people in it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. JuJu, I want to take you back to when I met you at Sierra Canyon. I asked you why SC and you said you wanted to start something special. After a tournament, two games in, a game like this, where you have a new scratch on your face, this was physical, both you guys took elbows to the face, came up big on boards, really in every phase of the game, I just want to ask you now, what makes this team so special?**

JUJU WATKINS: I mean, like coach said, it's the people. I really wouldn't want to be anywhere else. From our staff to our president to our athletic director, I mean, so many great people that have invested into this program and our success is a product of all of them buying in, so I'm just grateful to be here.

**Q. McKenzie, you stretched the floor beautifully tonight. The game got close in that third quarter. What worked so well for you guys to pull away late in**



**that quarter and then to start that fourth?**

MCKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, I think just staying poised. I think I mentioned it the other night. We matured a lot through that PAC 12 tournament and I think through the year we've seen everything. We have seen zones, we have seen junk defense, we have seen man, so I think all of us, especially the guards, just kind of staying ready. You don't really know where your shot may come from, but I was just feeling from three, so I was just trying to be confident in that area.

**Q. Clarice, can you describe the physicality of tonight's game and how you guys weathered that and then your career high in blocked shots?**

CLARICE UCHE AKUNWAFO: Yeah, physicality. Yeah, it was physical, but I think every game's physical. I just go out there and do my best with that.

Career high? That's kind of good. Thank you for telling me that. Yeah, it was fun. Yeah, just protect the ball and help my teammates.

**Q. I was right behind you when you were going through the crowd giving high-fives and all that stuff. What did this moment, that experience, what did it mean to you and how do you feel about bringing USC Nation up to Portland with you guys?**

MCKENZIE FORBES: Oh, it means everything, especially, I think, like coach mentioned, like, being a senior, it's been such a blessing to play in front of this crowd, to play in Galen with all the history and bring life back to it. So I just really want to -- like, I think you mentioned locker room. Like, we didn't want to leave court. I wanted to go around and make sure the fans know we appreciate them so much. They had that place jumping and it's so much fun to play with a crowd like that. Just super grateful.

JUJU WATKINS: I agree. It's a Monday night in L.A. We have students who probably have homework and school in the morning, so just to know that people really support us throughout their busy schedule. They could really be doing anything else, but they decided to be here so we're grateful for them.

**Q. How about going up to Portland?**

MCKENZIE FORBES: We need you all in Portland. Like you said, we're bringing it back to life, so I think it's -- a lot of these other schools have those long-standing fan bases that travel well. So if you can, we need you guys in Portland to come get loud for us because we're trying to win some more games.

**Q. McKenzie, there was a moment in the fourth quarter after Clarice missed a couple layups where it looked like you came over, put your arm around her, like, a little pump-up, and Clarice obviously, rest of the fourth quarter was out there and dominated. What did that speak to the trust that you guys have in her to know that she's going to come off the bench and battle against any front court that's necessary and maybe, JuJu, you can chime in here too, but just the trust that you guys have in her as a player.**

MCKENZIE FORBES: One hundred percent trust in Clarice. Every time she comes in the game, I know that there's going to be absolutely no drop-off. She's given us that lift all season. Take it all the way back to UCLA at home when we didn't even have Rayah, and she was a beast. So I have all the confidence in the world in her. I know that sometimes I think she's a bit hard on herself, so I just try to make sure to lift her up. She was a beast the rest of the fourth quarter and that doesn't surprise me at all.

JUJU WATKINS: I would put Clarice against any big in the country, so.

**Q. Clarice, you mentioned you're hard on yourself sometimes. How do you kind of stay mentally poised through those moments and how has that process been this season?**

CLARICE UCHE AKUNWAFO: For sure. Yeah, I'm always hard on myself. I think that's like my biggest problem. But I think my teammates, for sure, always have my back and are always tell me that I'm okay. My coaches and everybody, even fans as well too, like, always telling me and supporting me. It really means a lot.

**Q. McKenzie, obviously you've been through a few different programs and now your third time around, you're on such a historic team. What does it mean for you as a veteran cornerstone of this team to be a leader and find a new place and new home here?**

MCKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, it's been super special for me. I've enjoyed my time at every school, but I think this being kind of my last final run for it to be with this such a special group. I love everyone in this locker room. I love everyone on our staff. And to do it here where my family can come to every single game, it's just -- I feel super blessed, super grateful. I've made some of like my best friends here. Shout out to the managers in the back. I really do, I love it here, and when I decided to choose a school for my fifth year, I wanted it to be someplace that would feel like home, even after only one year, and that's what I hoped for here and I think that definitely came true.

**Q. Obviously this is your first year for both of you. You guys took USC to the Sweet 16 for the first time in 30 years. Obviously none of you were alive back then, JuJu mentioned. I wasn't alive either. So you mentioned like wanting to build something here. So when you look back, what is it going to be like looking back knowing that you were two of the players who kind of helped bring USC back to national prominence?**

McKENZIE FORBES: Yeah, I think it means a lot to both of us. I think, speaking for myself, it's a blessing to play by her side. She's an incredible generational talent. I think you guys have seen that on display. Yeah, just feel really lucky to be a part of the group that kind of brought it back and also shine light on the legends who came before us. So it's just been really fun to see this place come back to life.

JUJU WATKINS: Yeah, and to just fast-forward, when I'm done playing, when she's done playing, we want it to still be a winning culture here and we come back like Cheryl has done and Tina and some legends that have come back just to cheer us on and we hope to do that in the future as well.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thanks so much, girls. We'll take questions for Coach.

**Q. As of tonight five PAC 12 teams have made it to the Sweet 16. In a year in which that conference is, you know, on its last legs, just kind of what does that say about the quality and the competition and kind of where things are at right now?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I'm not surprised. I think we all knew what everyone in this conference was capable of. It's just such a good league. It was such a good league top to bottom. I've said the whole time I think even the teams in the middle were better than people realized. I think Arizona proved that. But for sure we knew that we were playing Sweet 16, Elite 8, quality games, Final Four quality games, night-in and night-out and sometimes three and four times in a row.

Tara started a nice -- a really nice group chat amongst the coaches before this tournament started, really before all the post-season started, and just as she's done for so long, been the leader on, hey, I know we're going our separate ways, but let's appreciate what we've all done together and let's all send it out the best we can. I think we all appreciate -- all those coaches and programs have made me a ton better because if you can prep for this league, you can prep for anything else that's coming your way. So

I'm not surprised at all, but I'm really proud of everyone.

**Q. Clarice, with her game today coming off the bench, just what impresses you the most about the growth that she's had in her career here at USC?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Clarice is something else. I don't know if a lot of you guys know, but she is premed. She has taken a ton of lab classes and is really committed. She's taking a really heavy load in the summer and all the time. I'm always -- we work together to make sure she can -- I can accommodate her schedule and make sure -- that's her ultimate goal, is to be a doctor, and she will be a doctor, right? But then she does this at a high level. She's really physically gifted. I think she's worked really hard to get her body in incredible shape. She is so athletic. Then I think she's really found her role. We talk about her confidence level. There's times in practice where the coaches will look and say, she doesn't realize how good she really could be and is at the things that she does. I think she's really owned a role that is so important in college basketball to have people buy into what they're doing. She and Rayah are like complete best friends. They were roommates freshmen year. So it's really neat to have them complement each other. They support each other a ton. A lot of gratitude for how she stays ready no matter what. A night like tonight showcases what she's really good at, which is defensively she's so strong and patrols that paint, as does Rayah, so that 1-2 punch. We always say, whoever they have as their big, and Jackson is good, we've got Rayah and C. And she knows sometimes that's going to be eight minutes game and tonight it was 19 and it was game-changing. So really proud of her on a number of different levels.

**Q. I'm really struck by the team chemistry and basically you've had this kind of situation before and this rodeo, bringing total strangers together. Like, I'm just wondering how do you -- have you ever been able to put your finger on how this all has come together? Because basically it's kind of almost your chemistry at this point that's taken you guys through, and then how that -- how you can maybe reflect that on the incredible growth and journey that you guys have had over four months thinking about the first game to now, it's like wow.**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, yeah. I had a ton of nerves today. I had a ton of nerves and not because of anything specific about basketball. Kansas is a really good team and I knew we had to play well. But I had nerves because I really enjoy this group and I want them to continue to be able to do this together. I want the country to see us. So actually I was like walking around campus and I sat down to get a coffee and one guy was on my right and he said,

seriously, you're just like sitting here casually like eating a salad and coffee when you have the game tonight, and I was like, Oh. He recognized me. He said, I had Taylor in class. He was a professor. He was like, I'll be there tonight. And then I finished and the woman on my right said, I can't wait for the game. I have my JuJu jersey ready, right?

And it gave me kind of a calm that at the end of it, these players really are who they are. We don't need to manufacture something new tonight, we have great chemistry, we have really good players that are tough. Got to make plays to win, but there is a chemistry about us that gives me a kind of calmness. I don't know, I can't put my finger on it exactly. I think it starts obviously with JuJu. Let's make no mistake, and when I say -- I don't do hyperbole, but someone tell me, if there's a better freshman season in the history of college basketball, I'd like to hear about it, because I'm not saying -- we can analyze the stats and this or that, and her stats are great, but in terms of the ability to raise up a program and do it selflessly and do it with the magnetism, it doesn't work if you have a star that people don't want to play with, and then to have the maturity of the veteran kids around her. We say maturity a lot, but they're also hoopers who make plays. And then to have a returning kids, you know, Rayah and Oto and C, come with us on this change, it's all kind of -- they have to be the right people. They have to buy into the right things. We've been challenged at times this year. Anything that could have been adverse, they turned it into positive. We kept getting better and it's, I've just seen it come together that way, and it's really a beautiful thing if you're into sports and leadership and things working together as a team, and that kind of impacts everything in life, I think.

**Q. You guys led for this whole game, but I want to ask you how important was it just starting off the game really fast, JuJu gave you seven points really quick, but just kind of continuing that momentum, how important was that in a game like this?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, it's huge. I think just to -- it's a 40-minute game you know it's going to be -- a lot of things are going to ebb and flow, but I think we came out really ready. I think this team is locked in. I also knew, and actually Brandon in his, I read his press conference from yesterday and just to see if there was anything I could get, and he said -- they asked about -- someone asked about JuJu, and he said, Of course we're going to come with a scout and a game plan, but the thing about great players is you got to execute that game plan. So I do think getting to new teams that haven't seen her before, for her to come out really aggressive and be like, okay, it's not as easy as it might look on film, set a tone for us. Then they

obviously, you know, I thought we got stops early and we came out hot, that really helped, I think, just give us a confidence level, for sure. We knew they were going to come back at us. They went zone. They got really aggressive to the rim. We had to weather some storms in there. But I think the hot start just made us feel like, okay, you know, we know we can be us and we have to be us at a high level and we can do what we need to do.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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