

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - UNC Greensboro vs USC

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

Media Conference

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Happy March Madness to everyone. I'm really grateful to be playing in this tournament. Again, it's never lost on me what a neat opportunity it is. Specifically to be playing in Galen for the first two rounds is really special.

Our team's focused and ready to go, and we're looking forward to playing a really good UNCG team tomorrow who obviously has been very hot and earned their way here.

Q. You had mentioned after the Big Ten Tournament that you were really pleased with the way your team had responded to its previous losses. So I'm wondering what you've seen over the last couple of weeks that mirrors that?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, this is a little bit of a different circumstance because it's so long since we last played. I think it's a mix between kind of conjuring up that feeling that we had that's not a good one to keep us motivated. But also resetting because March Madness is March Madness in a time for sort of your highest level no matter what.

I think we've got a little bit of both going on -- the joy and excitement and the kind of focus of playing in March Madness and a little bit of an edge because we're not happy with the way the most previous game ended. It's been a mix of both.

Q. I asked Juju this morning about how she felt about making the final in the Naismith Defensive Player of the Year award. How do you guys feel as a coaching staff, and how have you viewed her development in defense over these last few years?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Did she know? I'm not even sure she was aware.



Q. She smiled. She said she liked defense a little bit.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: (Laughs.) I think it's a testament to a couple of things, I think it's a testament to our team's defense because I don't think anyone who is on a national defensive player of the year finalist if your team gives up a ton of points.

I think Coach B gets a ton of credit for orchestrating our defense, the rest of our coaching staff for their scouts -- our team defense, which really works together.

But Juju is just phenomenal on both ends of the floor. I think her growth and leap this year has -- she's always had just incredible instincts. Her quickness of hands and deflections, shot blocking.

But I think sophomore year you know what's going on a little bit more even. So now you add the scouting report to your athleticism and your understanding. And she's really a menace and phenomenon on that end of the floor, too.

I think it goes together in conjunction with our team of feeling like we have weapons on that end of the floor as well as on the offensive end. I'm proud of her for that recognition.

Q. Going into the tournament, I think that you guys are not getting the respect you deserve for your defensive play on that end of the court. Are you emphasizing that more in the tournament to really show how good you guys are defensively? Or what are you emphasizing in the tournament?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I don't care what anyone thinks really. At this point it's just about getting wins. Quite honestly, right? I'm sure there's people who think we're good and people who think we're not good or value this or that. It really doesn't impact anything.

I think we're just trying to get the team ready to handle anything that comes in March and April. And when you can really defend well, it's going to be a huge factor in March games.



I think we have emphasized that all year. We do think it's part of our calling card, that when we're playing other really good teams and other really good players that they shouldn't get things as easily against us that they do against other teams. That's what being part of a winning team is.

So we've emphasized that before we knew who we were playing when we were just working on us. We've emphasized that since we know who we're playing and you add a scout. But that's always been part of our identity this year.

Q. Was asking Juju where the tradition of the high bun started. She said, I wore it and I played better. Do you take a certain amount of comfort with, there's the bun; we're okay? Is there any significance to it?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think at this point there's like a significance in terms of her public persona. You see the bun sort of in her Funko Pop thing and people recognize it. And I think it's really cool when you see little girls with the bun.

But for us, you know, we feed off of Juju's energy and her personality and her everything.

Once in a while, like when she doesn't have the bun in for practice, I kind of do a double take just because you're used to seeing her in season in the bun. But for us it's about who she is as a person and player. Her hairstyle is just a bonus.

Q. I saw a video clip of teammates racing after her with water bottles. I don't know if it's a celebration, she was covering up her hair. Are there any rules, like, no touching the bun?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Maybe they have internal team rules. Everyone is very conscious of one another's hair. We do know that they feel better when they look better. So anyone with fresh braids or a bun in, everyone's pretty respectful of one another, for sure.

Q. I asked Talia a little bit about experience in the NCAA Tournament. This team's coming off an Elite Eight, of course. What's the mindset going into game one and the importance of winning game one and taking it game by game, versus looking so far down the line?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We have an interesting mix. We have players that have been here in our locker room and gone to an Elite Eight. We've had, obviously, both Kiki and

TVO have had long tournament runs at different schools. And we have got freshmen who have never gone through it before.

But I think really the significance of game one, if you don't win game one, you're done. That's where we are right now. We feel we've been in a one-and-done situation since the end of our regular season because we had to win the last couple of games to win a Big Ten regular season title. Then obviously went into a one-and-done situation in Indy. That's first and foremost.

But I think a lot of this has been, for me in the last two weeks of preparation, about a mindset -- a mindset of continuing to get better because I think that's been part of our narrative all year that we can be one of the top teams that still has room for growth, and that's an exciting thing.

It's been about urgency in each moment because it is a one-and-done situation, but still a confidence that we have everything that we need. So a lot of our last two weeks have been about technical things and also about mindset.

Q. Saw you at the Cavs game. In catching up with folks, did anybody, any of the coaches or whatever, have any suggestions, or, hey, Lindsay, I think you should try this? Do you get that from people, especially like, oh, you should do this with Juju?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: No, it was an unbelievable opportunity. It's the first time I've seen the Cavs in person this year. I'm so proud of the young players that I coached there.

I think about -- everyone think it's easy to be an NBA player and make all that money but Darius Garland had some lows and then a high and then got hurt last year. I told him how proud I am of him. And he said, I'm so proud of you, which is cool.

One of my colleagues, who is on the front bench, is a USC grad, Mike Gerrity, just rooting for you. The front office people, some of the other players, it's more just a lot of love.

But I think it shows how locked in people are on women's basketball and what we're doing here. There's no question they're watching and they have a sense.

But, no, they don't try to give suggestions on what to run or what to do. They're just supportive.

For me it was actually the timing was good. I think with everything going on in my head, just being locked in on this, to just watch a game and to kind of be a fan and just

watch, like, watch what chemistry on the bench looks like; watch what those two high-level teams are doing. That kind of gets me in my zone when I can just take basketball from a different perspective and take some things away.

That ended up being a really fun thing for me to do. I'm glad I did it.

Q. We talked about all the players on the roster from Los Angeles, specifically Rayah. What do you think it means to have someone from the city play a sudden important role heading into this March Madness?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think it's amazing. Did you guys see, finally got the collaboration done, where now a couple other jerseys are being sold at the games and stuff? I wouldn't be surprised if that 13 Marshall jersey sells out because I think there's so much love and respect for Rayah, not only being from here and representing South Central and L.A. so well, but for staying here and for being part of a growth trajectory here.

I've seen it every single day in the locker room and having her go from a young freshman just trying to make her way to a senior who's talking in our film sessions about what coverages look like and guiding young people.

I think it's about her growth but I also think it's about what she's represented for LA. I hope she takes a lot of pride in what she's helped build here when there's fans here for the NCAA Tournament. We talk all the time, we were watching at home her freshman year. Now look at what she's helped build.

Q. Are there any things that you do outside of basketball at a time like this when all of the cameras are swirling and your life seems to (indiscernible) to just remind yourself, I'm still Lindsay, I'm a person? It's not just your job, but it's something that is outside of what your total existence is?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Like me as a person separate from the team? I have a 2-year-old and 7-year-old who remind me every single day that there's a different world outside of this, although they love the team and they want to talk about it. Our family is important to me.

But also I try to, like everyone does, they give you your own mental health things or ways you reset to put yourself in the best possible position.

We're lucky here in L.A. I can drive 20 minutes to Manhattan Beach where I don't live, but it feels like you're on vacation for 30 minutes and go for a walk and just try to reset and keep my mind clear, which makes me show up

better for the team and what we need to do.

But it really isn't about me. It's about me trying to get these young women ready for the opportunity in front of them. Like I said, the gratitude to be able to coach in the NCAA Tournament the, play in the NCAA Tournament and everything we want is in front of us, we've just got to go attack it.

Q. What does UNCG bring to the court? What kind of stands out on tape? They played both North Carolina and Georgia, who are two big teams in terms of ranking and whatnot. What do they bring? What do they do well?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Anytime you're 24-6, win your regular conference season and your conference tournament, you're winners. You know how to win.

They have legit size at the 5 spot. They start 6'5". I think they have 6'5" off the bench as well. And they put a lot of athleticism around the perimeter, more like a four-guard system. They run kind of a dribble drive.

They're very aggressive. Get to the rim in an attacking, aggressive way. And also everyone can shoot the 3, other than the five players.

They bring an exciting brand of basketball and a successful brand of basketball. Otherwise they wouldn't be here. So we have a lot of respect for Coach and what she's done and for a team -- there's a lot to be said about winners.

They didn't get hot and win their conference tournament; they were the best team all year and best in the conference tournament, and they're here for a reason.

Q. Kennedy has filled such an important role it seemed like this year just as a freshman. When did you first kind of notice her, and what makes her special? And how have you seen her step into from playing a lead scoring role throughout high school to step into a role where she's doing that less?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: When did I notice her, like in the recruiting process? I actually vividly remember a conversation. Shout-out to Elbert Kinnebrew, who ran the Cal Sparks club program for a long time -- and actually he's dealing with a battle right now against cancer. He's just a good human above all else. I'm going long with this because, A, shout out to Elbert because we all love you and respect the heck of you.

I bring his name up because when I went to the NBA I really no longer needed any of the numbers in my phone

that were contacts from AAU and club, just from a business standpoint. I didn't.

You keep in touch with people that you want in your life whether or not they have a kid.

So Elbert, who is a USC grad and just a really good human is someone I kept in touch with just as a human.

Then I get the job and I vividly remember sitting outside my house. And I was new to the job. He said I've got one for you, I've got a young kid. Keep an eye on Kennedy Smith.

I said, okay. I remember that conversation. And that's what started us recruiting her.

Her development throughout her high school years is actually pretty significant. I think when you first saw her, when I first saw her, you go, okay, is this a kid who is a 4 who can play the wing, or is she a 3?

Her skill set continued to develop and develop and develop. And she became quite literally a top, top player in the country. She was a huge priority for us.

So we knew what we were getting. And she's a winner. So if you see her high school team play and you see the part that she has -- she's part of a lot of winning. We knew what we were getting.

She's delivered on every level. She's our third leading scorer, obviously an incredible defender and just someone we rely heavily on. We knew when she got hurt it was a chance for other people to step up which helped us in the long run. But we knew that was a big loss even four games in.

We think she is a huge part of our ability to make a long run now. But even more so, I think, going forward she's going to be a problem for everyone else in the country for several years because we think she's that good.

Q. Kennedy mentioned that she's a perfectionist. I know Talia also said there have been times this season where she's been hard on herself. How have you seen her kind of deal with that and sort of deal with the mental challenges of being a freshman?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She is. I haven't seen someone be such a perfectionist on the defensive end. Usually everyone gets a little mad at themselves if they miss a shot or miss a play or something. Like, this kid gets mad at her if she misses a coverage.

Most freshmen don't know what a coverage is. She's just

really elite in that sense. And some of it for me, and it's always a challenge as a coach, is learning personalities, what makes them go, what doesn't make them go.

Sometimes I'd be, why does she get down on herself. You learn it's because she's a perfectionist. For me a lot of it has been trying to be, like, just let yourself go. Mistakes happen. Good plays happen. But the more you're at a high tempo, high energy, the more good is going to happen for our team.

And, yeah, she's such a team player and such a winner that I think it comes down to, she wants to make every play she can make for us to win. So some of it is even unlocking that next level for her of confidence that she knows.

I don't care if you make a mistake or not. The next three plays are under your control because, again, that's the respect I have for her ability.

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