

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

## USC Trojans

## Lindsay Gottlieb

## Kiki Iriafen

## JuJu Watkins

## Kayleigh Heckel

Media Conference

USC - 71, UNC Greensboro - 25

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with Coach Gottlieb making introductory comments.

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: First thing, I want to congratulate UNC Greensboro and their Coach Trina Patterson and their players on an incredible season. It's really hard to earn the conference regular season and tournament title. They earned their way here. I thought they came out and played with really good intensity.

I also want to commend the crowd. It's never lost on me how incredible it is kind of what we've built here in a time when people said you couldn't do it in LA or at SC for women's basketball. It's a credit to our players and how they play and the administration, who's poured in support in a number of ways.

Yeah, so just an exciting day. Glad to get the first one out of the way. Excited to be continuing to play.

I thought we were a little bit rusty on offense early, but also that was credit to UNCG, who came out and played some tough D. I thought we figured it out together. I thought our defense was our calling card. I thought the pressure helped get us going.

I thought we got contributions from everyone. I thought our bench came in and did a really good job today, as well as our go-to people sitting right here who hold us down day in and day out.



**Q. JuJu, how are you feeling just in general? What happened with your hand? And then in the third quarter it seemed like you were limping after a shot.**

JUJU WATKINS: I don't know. You know, it's the end of the season. Body's a little banged up, but onto the next. Nobody really cares, so onto the next.

**Q. We know you came back in the game. You're fine?**

JUJU WATKINS: Oh, I'm all good. Don't worry. Don't worry.

**Q. Kiki, did it feel like you guys had some rust to shake off at the start of that game?**

KIKI IRIAFEN: Yes, I think it was pretty evident. One, we were like really excited to just be playing again. We haven't played in about two weeks. Playing in your home court. So I think there's a lot of rust but a lot of excitement.

I think our defense really helped us in that first half staying in the game. Then Coach talked some sense into us, and I think we came out much better in the second half.

**Q. I have a follow-up about talking sense into you. Do you want to talk about talking sense?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I try to be sensical once in a while. Really just, I think it's a unique situation where I feel like we've accomplished a lot and we've got a really good team, but we still have more growth, which is a good thing, right? We've got a period of time here.

Just reminding us that we have everything we need in the locker room, but we also don't have to be perfect, and it doesn't all come sometimes all at once. Just getting us back to what our core mission is, and they were really responsive, and I thought that was really important.

**Q. JuJu, when you left the game in the second half, were you scared at all for any moment? What did you feel coming off the court? And how frustrated were you with the offense in the first half?**

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JUJU WATKINS: I don't think it's frustration. I think it's just knowing we could be better. Like Kiki said, we had some rust to get off. Hopefully that's all done with, and we can really head into this next matchup with our best versions of ourselves and play our game.

**Q. And when you came off?**

JUJU WATKINS: When I came back? No, I wasn't worried at all. I'm really confident in my team regardless of if I'm in or not. I know what they can do. It's just a matter of, when I'm in, just impacting the game as much as I can.

**Q. For all you ladies, what did you think that UNC Greensboro was making you guys early struggle with the offense in the first half?**

KAYLEIGH HECKEL: We talked about it at halftime. They have a very high defensive efficiency. They're No. 1 in the country in that. I think that was probably disrupting us a little bit.

I think the biggest thing for us was us being able to fix ourselves. I think we were kind of beating ourselves in the first half on offense. I think we had to regroup at halftime, and when we did that, we got into our flow.

**Q. Follow-up to that, you did a reverse layup in the game, and the team all jumped up off the bench. How did that make you feel as far as the momentum of the game?**

KAYLEIGH HECKEL: It made me feel great. My teammates are super supportive of me, and I feel like every time anyone who does anything good on the court, we're always hyping them up in any way possible. It's just cool for my teammates to be supportive of me for sure.

**Q. Can you talk about Rayah Marshall's effort in this game, getting seven blocks, her effort? Tell me about her day-to-day, and how much she is committed to this team.**

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think I say this all the time when I speak about Rayah. She is the anchor to our team. There's no us without Rayah. She's such an unsung heroes of this team. She's one of the veterans that has been here all four years with Coach Gottlieb.

She's just so vocal. Even when she's not on the court, we can always hear her. She's always positive. So she's always impacting the game whether she's on the floor or not. I think with her she just really instills a lot of confidence in us defensively, and offensively whenever

we're stagnant, she's typically the one to get us back into our flow.

**Q. Kiki, can you talk about what is it about this team that makes it fun? It seems like you guys always have the energy despite struggles or miscommunication. What is it about playing with this team?**

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think we have a lot of youth. I would say I'm getting up there in age. Playing with a lot of freshmen and sophomores and young players kind of makes me go out there and have fun. They play so carefree. So I try to do the same.

I think it's super special when you get to play at home. You have that sixth man with the crowd in it.

For us it's a great opportunity to be here. We know that nothing is promised. We have to take one game at a time. I think we're super grateful to be on this big stage and take advantage of it.

**Q. JuJu, it seemed like the defense really changed, the effort changed when you guys went to the press. What is it that makes you guys so good at that full court pressure?**

JUJU WATKINS: I think -- like I said, our defense is something that we really take pride in. I think because we couldn't really get it going on our offense, we relied on our defensive ability. Rayah is a dog. She always brings a bunch of energy, Ken, K9, I mean, they really turned the game around for us.

When things aren't going our way on one side of the floor, we always try our best to make it up.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, student-athletes, for coming in.

**Q. Coach, you guys limited them to 11 missed field goals in the second quarter and only one made field goal in the third quarter. What was kind of the secret of the defense to kind of limit them to that and force so many turnovers that ended up being probably like 32 points off turnovers?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Part of it, that's what we try to do no matter who the team is, but I thought they run a dribble drive offense and play four guards. I thought our ability to keep the ball in front of us and then Rayah helping patrol that paint when we did get beat was critical. And I thought we defended the 3-point line well.

**Q. Lindsay, I just wanted to ask, when you put Rayah**

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**on the front line of the press, what do you think that wrinkle does to another team? How do you think that kind of suffocates them?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's so good there, and she's always been long. She's always been -- moves really well laterally. What we've seen, I think, over the last year or two is she's really owned that spot and takes a lot of pride in it, her angles. She's really smart there. Her angles are really good. She understands it's a big part of her role, so she's really terrific in that spot.

**Q. Lindsay, what does your heart tell you about this next game?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I took a nice photo with my friends from Cal yesterday, and we said this is our Thanks a Lot NCAA Committee photo.

First and foremost, I'm focused on this team and whatever happens, and Coach B worked with Coach Sam at Mississippi State. There's relationships in this game. So on the one hand, you know you like to root for your people that you know. On the other hand, you don't want to play your people that you know.

So I'm rooting for a lot of overtimes and a very well played, tough game, and we'll face whoever the winner is. Two really good teams with different styles.

**Q. You got to empty your bench today, including like some people who played really strong minutes and scored some points. What is that momentum, energy, kind of camaraderie moment mean for this team, and how does that carry forward into the next games?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think there's -- our bench that consistently is in the rotation and gets minutes, and I thought they really showed up today and played great, and I thought, as JuJu mentioned, it kind of shifted the game a bit, so that was great.

Then when you can play everybody, all 14 people that are healthy to play -- you know Laura Williams is injured -- I think it gives an emotional boost because they're a huge part of what we do. We say it all the time, and I know our team believes it, and we try to show it in the ways that don't show up on a stat sheet or on the court. But when you can also do it on the court there's nothing that matches that. It's great.

When you see them cheer for one another, when AG made a bucket and Viv. We have a lot of belief in all of our players, but they play their roles that we ask them to play, and when they get rewarded in a public setting like that, it's

just icing on the cake.

**Q. Coach, what was responsible for the slow start on offense today?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, UNCG is the No. 1 defensive team in the country in terms of their efficiency, I believe. They came out with a game plan. I think they did a really good job. There's always going to be a resistance from another team.

I also think we haven't played in two weeks, and I think our players had a good energy about them before hand, but maybe that sped us up a little bit. I think we figured it out, but just it took us a little bit to knock down some shots. It took us a little bit to get in a flow. I think we never quite felt in a flow.

You've got to credit the other team for that a little bit for trying to take you out of a flow. And I think we also have to understand how to get ourselves in a flow when teams are trying to take things away from us.

**Q. Lindsay, when JuJu is clearly banged up a little bit in terms of her wrist and we saw her exit the game a little bit, I'm curious what's your kind of process of figuring out whether it's keeping her in the game or giving her more? I know you guys said you had some rust to shake off, but what was kind of the thinking there?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We're fortunate that we were able to sit everybody, all the starters down with about 6:30 to go. JuJu probably hasn't played under 30 minutes in about a month and a half or whatever because the Big Ten season is hard likewise.

So I think we earned the right to be in a game where we can rest some people somewhat. When it's in the middle of like rotations, like regular rotations and it's not time to sit people down yet, I trust her. I listen to her. I trust our trainers and I say you good? When she says she's good, I'm probably not going to shut her down when she says she's good before it's time to shut her down.

**Q. Can you just talk a little bit about JuJu's defense and how that's kind of grown over your time coaching her? Obviously there's a lot of talk about her offensive abilities and her skills, but can you just talk about how her defense has really changed over time?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, she's game changing on both ends of the floor. She's always just had qualities that you can't teach, instincts, timing, her ability to block shots without fouling, her ability to keep someone in front and

make it tough on them.

But what you add over the course of your career -- and it's similar with Rayah -- you take those gifts, and then you add knowledge. I feel like that's what our job is to try to give them the answers before they take the exam. The greatest players use their instincts, but then they also take whatever the scouting report is and they add that.

Now there's a deeper level of understanding of what the looks are going to be, and then she can still be herself and go out and make some plays. She does some things on the defensive end that we don't practice in practice, but you try to put her in situations to have the ability to make those plays, and I think she's really impactful on both ends of the floor, whether it's deflections, which we track, she gets a ton, blocks and steals, but really just being tough to score on in a one-on-one situation as well.

**Q. How do you feel like this team has grown since the loss last March? Against UConn, of course.**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We're a different team from that team certainly. A lot of different cast of characters, different people. I think how this team has grown is just an understanding of who we are.

I think we had a group that had a really great chemistry from the jump off the court. Everyone really likes each other. But you can put a bunch of great players on a piece of paper, and it doesn't make for a great team. You've got to work to get that.

So I think they've really worked to have a synergy with one another on the court, to have an identity on both ends of the floor, to understand what each other brings and how we can take advantage.

That's still a process for us, but it's leaps and bounds from -- it doesn't mean we're perfect all the time, we certainly aren't, but our ability to kind of respond in situations and understand what the task at hand is and do our best to get it done is better than it was earlier in the year because we have a better synergy amongst one another on the court and in huddles and things like that.

**Q. I wanted to ask you just about Aaliyah Gayles out there hooping today. What does it mean to you to see her out there considering all that she's been through?**

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: She's just a critical part of our team, first and foremost. I see her hoop in practice a lot. She does an incredible job actually a lot of times of playing on the scout team and being the other team's best player or the other team's elite guard. So we see her doing some

great things.

But to be able to have her in a crowd like this, to feel the love from this community, from this school -- you know, I always talk to her about every step in her journey isn't the last one, it's just another one. So to see her in good health wearing a USC jersey playing in an NCAA Tournament game for our team, it's really significant on so many levels.

It's not the end of her story by any means, but it's always good to recognize a step and say how cool it is at the point that we're at right now.

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