

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Mississippi State vs USC

Monday, March 24, 2025

Los Angeles, California, USA

Galen Center

USC Trojans

Coach Lindsay Gottlieb

Avery Howell

Kiki Iriafen

Media Conference

USC - 96, Mississippi State - 59

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I don't have an update on JuJu. I know that's what you all want to know, other than the statement that was put out at halftime, that she's getting incredible medical care from our Keck Medicine, people at USC, trainers and doctors. The players don't have any update either. Respectfully, I'd ask you not to ask them something they don't know.

I'm feeling a lot of emotions, obviously. But the biggest one is pride. What a performance by this group.

When you throw a bunch of talented people on a team, it doesn't become a team until you work through some things. I always thought throughout the year that if we had something to work on, which would be when things didn't go right right away, sometimes we stressed out.

How about this? Something didn't go right for us. You never want anyone to go down, especially someone like JuJu, that we all lean on in so many ways. But this team rallied. They rallied for her. They rallied for each other. Our fans had our back. I'm just really proud. I think we showed what kind of team we are.

Credit to Mississippi State for getting to this point. But I think what you saw here was a really good, determined team that had something to play for, and you saw the results.

Kiki was unbelievable. Avery as well. And it was a true team effort, and I don't think I'll forget this night for a lot of reasons.



Q. Kiki, Avery, can you tell us what it's like to bounce back after you see JuJu in so much pain? I can imagine it's hard to get things straight after that. How did you guys rally from that point on?

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think as Coach mentioned, it's hard when you have such a key player not with you, but at the end of the day we have to win the game. Respectfully, nobody cares on this big stage that we lost her. For us, it's just that we want to make sure we got the job done, want our season to be extended. Rallying, doing whatever we can to make sure we could get out of Galen.

Q. When you guys came into the game, did you expect it to be this physical, or was this something over physical than what you guys expected?

EVERY HOWELL: I think we expected the game to be pretty physical. Obviously they're a really good team. We knew they were going to come with a lot of different aspects to their game to try to stop us in any way they could. But I think that our team came in with a mindset that we're not going to get punked by anyone.

We were ready for whatever they threw us, in any form, offense, switching up what we're running, defense, putting on our press or taking it off. So I think we knew they were going to be pretty physical. But I think we handled it really well.

Q. The one stat that really impressed me was the 29 assists that you guys had tonight. Can you talk about you guys sharing the basketball tonight?

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think today was really just a team effort. The ball was electric. We were moving that ball. We were passing that ball. That's what makes the win so grand. I don't know, I feel like this team, we're just trying to do whatever we can to keep it going. I think we're very unselfish. You could really see that today.

It makes it super fun when everybody's able to contribute. I think we had a lot of energy, and our fans today were incredible. So that was an extra sixth man for us.



Q. Kiki, you just mentioned the crowd was the sixth man tonight. Of course they were cheering you guys, but wondering what you thought of just their anger and emotion they displayed when the other team had the ball and the cheerleaders from the other team came out.

KIKI IRIAFEN: I think it just shows how ride or die our fans are. We really appreciate them. I wish we could take them to Spokane and everywhere else with us. We're super grateful for that. As a 1 seed that's what you're most grateful for is having the fans behind you because it could be like the edge-tipping thing when you're in close games.

But I think they gave us a lot of energy, especially when things weren't going our way. It was nice to have a packed house today.

Q. What did you think of Rayah's game today especially considering this is her last game most likely in Galen Center?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I think the questions are supposed to be for the student-athletes but I'm going to take it because I want to talk about Rayah. She came here when there were no fans. I think this crowd getting to see her play with a ton of energy, and we talk about her at the front of the press and her defensive coverages, and she just anchors us in so many ways. So I'm very happy for her that she got to feel an energy like this for her last game in Galen. She deserves that.

Q. Avery, you guys had buzzer beaters before the end of the first quarter, second quarter third quarter. I think you hit the first one. You swarmed each other on the court after all those. Could you talk about that camaraderie after hitting those shots and how the bench helped you guys today?

EVERY HOWELL: Yeah, I think that everyone on our team plays a huge role. Our bench especially. We always have a lot of bench energy which affects our energy on the floor. I think just the way we shared the ball tonight was amazing. I think that it just helped fuel everyone and give energy into everyone's games.

We hit more shots that way. You feel like your teammates have you. So I think that all of those buzzer beaters and even every shot and every and-one, those are energy plays for us that the bench is hyped, the coaching staff is hyped, the atmosphere in the gym, whoever hit the shot whoever passed it everyone honestly feels that. I think it's a momentum swing for us. We kept it rolling. I think it's great.

Q. Question for both athletes can you speak about the freshman group talk of the season how you prevailed showed up in big moments like that. Can you speak towards that?

EVERY HOWELL: We have a really big freshman class. It's great to be super connected. We're really close. And I think that that's impacted our whole team. I think we have a pretty big role this year, which Coach has let us have.

And we're prepared for most moments because of the time we're given in games and how hard we work in practice. And everyone plays a super important role and we execute that. It's been a learning experience for everyone. But throughout this year it's been great just being able to play alongside super great players, learning from them and being able to execute on the floor.

Q. Kiki, everyone knows there's more than just one person on this team. But do you feel like maybe tonight was kind of a defining moment for you guys that you were able to suffer that loss early and then maybe showed people that all of us could play together and really build some momentum off of this tonight?

KIKI IRIAFEN: I wouldn't say this is our defining moment. I think we've had multiple moments this season of team basketball. I think if anything, the end of the season, the postseason we've really been clicking. And it's at the perfect time. I would rather it be this way than any other way.

I think for us it was just rallying. I think we wanted it really badly. We didn't want our season to end. As Avery mentioned we worked super hard in practice. We trust in what the coach has for us.

I wouldn't say it's a defining moment. I think it's what we expect of ourselves. We expect to win in this tournament regardless if it's going our way, we have people we don't have people. That's the standard here. We expect to win. For us, it's just keeping the main thing the main thing.

Q. Could you talk to me about Kayleigh Heckel and her energy during this game? Just tell me about her as a player and how helpful she's been to you all this season?

EVERY HOWELL: Heckel is my roommate. I spent a lot of time with her and she's great. It's great, off the court she's quiet, but when she plays she's not quiet. You'll know her name. You'll know who she is when she's playing.

I think she's the energizer, the spark we need. Most of the times she comes in the game shifts for us. She's someone who is able to get us on runs, she's great defensively. She gets to the basket, call her own number. And she's just fearless.

As we've been saying the freshmen this year are really not freshmen. I think she embodies that as well as does Avery and Kennedy. But she's someone who just kind of goes out there. She is just happy playing basketball. I think for us she's the spark we need in crucial moments.

Q. One follow-up on Kayleigh. How much do you encourage her to be aggressive on both ends of the floor? Seems like when she does play really aggressive, it plays to your guys' advantage?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: My conversations with her, it's hard to be a freshman point guard on a team that has championship aspirations, but I want her to be her as much as possible.

We know how talented she is. Essentially the initial defender doesn't exist. She can get by anybody. I think her growth has come in reads. She has six assists and one turnover.

I told someone this today, it reminds me when I was with the Cavs, I watched a lot of film with Collin Sexton because he was the same. He could get by. And it was, what do you do next? I really encourage her to be as aggressive as possible, and when there's a parting of the sea and you can go to the rim, go to the rim.

She's an incredible finisher. But also that next level of, okay, I can get by my man and do I set us up, do I run?

I think when she's aggressive those live reads happen, and her growth has been tremendous.

And on the other side of the ball she's grown a ton defensively, too, and she makes a bunch of things happen for us. So an aggressive canine is a really good thing for us.

Q. I know exactly how much each one of these players mean to you. Tonight you lose a generational talent, arguably the best player in college basketball. The Trojan model was "Fight On". How do you galvanize and how do you manage and galvanize your team to fight on without JuJu?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Yeah, I mean, like I said I don't know exactly what's going to come in these next couple of

hours. Let me find out what's going on.

But, I mean, you cannot tell me that the energy of that crowd and how sort of angry they were with the other team and how much fired up they were for our team is so much about what JuJu has given to this arena, to this program, to this city.

And you just want to give it all back. You want to give it all back and support her however we can. But also the team has become a team and deserves my best and our best to build that belief in them that they can do anything.

And so we don't get to go on the coaching manuscript and go by what everything the way it's supposed to happen. And whatever comes with it we will make sure that we're pouring into this team, to JuJu and keeping us together because as you saw tonight, we are capable of a lot of greatness. That's what will continue to be the message to our team.

Q. Lindsay, you mentioned how well the team rallied after that moment. What do you tell them when you gather the team after JuJu goes down?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I just tried to look people in the eye and say we can do this. We've got this. We need everybody. Stay focused and locked in on the task at hand.

But they're competitors. And that's what they are naturally want to do is have someone's back. I think they had her back. I think they had each other's back. They stuck together and, like I said, the fans felt a part of that, too.

You had to be here to feel it, I think. I don't know if people saw that through the TV, but it was a palpable thing that I think everyone wanted to step up for one another and I just had to guide them in that direction.

Q. In a game that's as physical as this one but one where there's some chatter here and there on the court, what do you do and what role does Kiki play in ensuring that the team just stays focused on themselves and doesn't get overly reactive to a lot of the exchanges on the court?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: You heard Avery reference it. The terminology I'll use, there's no punks in our locker room. There was a comment, I think, from one of their players after their last game, that, oh, the SEC and we're tough.

We know that we have got no punks in our locker room, that we've got a team that's going to step up. But we also talked about doing that in a very -- the way that we do.



Box out. Meet your passes, make the right play, move that ball.

As the game got chippier all we needed to do was just stay being us. We weren't extra. We were just us. We are tough. We are physical. We are very clean in doing that.

I thought the leaders on the court -- I kept saying to them, hey, the more extra they get, the more clean we need to be. So I think you saw it in the right ways. I think they rallied for one another. I think they felt some kind of way about Ju not being there in with them.

But we rallied being tougher and cleaner with our execution. And I think Kiki was a great example of that. She was just dominant. So was the rest of our team. That's what you lean on, right, when you need to.

Q. You kind of alluded to where I was going with my question. You talked about if SEC, and I was thinking with the conference being the SEC versus Big Ten, did you see that there was a difference in how I guess the intensity of playing against was it something with the conference rivalry or do you think it would have mattered?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: We're playing to get to a Sweet 16. It was USC versus Mississippi State. Conferences don't get trophies for who wins the most games in the tournament. We're trying to get us where we need to go.

With that said, I think there's a perception -- less about -- it's only our first year in the Big Ten but more about like the West Coast. People think of West Coast teams aren't as tough or what have you or there's a persona that maybe teams in other areas are tougher.

If you've seen us play this year, you know, I think everyone would say that we're skilled and a physical team. A lot of athleticism. A lot of speed and power. We're not going to get punked. That's just not the way we're going to go down.

I didn't think it was anything special to do with conferences. We just knew they were going to come in here and try to manhandle us. And that just wasn't going to happen.

Q. Can you tell me what was going through your mind when Aaliyah went down and she banged her head, and the frustration that it felt like it was coming from that team against the players and how that turned out for you?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: I mean, I'd be lying if I told you that I wasn't rattled seeing JuJu on the floor and crying. I

mean, this is a human game. And so tried obviously my best to be what I needed to be for the team, but internally it's a lot.

So Aaliyah goes down also but she was quick to say I'm fine, I'm fine. But in general you always want to be supportive of your players, just continue to remind the officials that it's okay if there's 50 fouls are happening you call 50 fouls. If there's not, there's not. But remind them to keep the game at a level that is the way we want to play it.

But this is a human proposition that we're in. And seeing one player go down the way JuJu did was emotional for me. So then seeing Aaliyah go down also, I was relieved to hear her say I'm good.

Q. Can you describe your difference in emotions when the injury in the first quarter, but then Rayah hits the 3 and people are chanting her name and people are chanting Kiki's name, the crowd is amazing, Kayleigh has that great spin. So many great moments tonight despite an unfortunate one. Can you describe your emotions early on and at the end?

LINDSAY GOTTLIEB: Just so much pride. I walked in there and I said usually you're jumping up and down and (indiscernible) we're going to the Sweet 16. I said the thing I want you to really hear me say is how proud I am of all of you.

I had a quote before the last game, I'm always reading them a quote before the game. Before the last game it was about individual drops of water just not being the same as a tidal wave.

I think we have so many gifted, wonderful people in that locker room up and down. A lot of talent. We have a lot of really good humans. But together you can do something that you can't do as individual drops of water.

I think we felt like a tidal wave tonight. Obviously I'm just heartbroken if there's a serious injury for JuJu. But at the same time so see this place rally behind her, I hope she can at some point see just the significance that she has here that goes so far beyond just her talent and abilities.

That's what's really generational about it, the way she's galvanized everyone, and the way that her team, A, had her back and also really is a team.

And we've got people who are capable and willing to step up. So that was that mix of emotions throughout the game. Just mostly proud of our fans and our team.

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