NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Final - Duke vs UCLA

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Golden 1 Center

UCLA Bruins

Coach Cori Close

Charlisse Leger-Walker

Gianna Kneepkens

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by coach Cori Close from UCLA. Start with a little perspective about your game now that you had a chance to digest it a little bit and also about tomorrow's match-up.

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, I think, obviously, just really thankful to have another time to try to compete to go 1-0. There's a series of one-game opportunities. And we are, I think, just taking a really business-like approach, just like we do every game: What did it teach us; how does it make us better; how does it prepare us for the next match-up? And then we move on to, what is it going to look like to play our best basketball against Duke?

I think Duke is an excellent team. We sort of told our team, look, these are two completely different teams. And even though we played in November, credit to them, they have just done a marvelous job with their team and how they're playing right now and the connectivity that they're playing with. They're just playing with great effort and great connectivity.

And I think we're a lot different and better, too. So it's going to be a matter of who can play to their identity best. And we have a lot of respect for them and we have a lot of confidence in ourselves. So it will be a great battle.

Q. What was it like for you watching that shot go around the rim and around.

CORI CLOSE: Wow.

Q. Have you ever seen anything like that as far as a game-winner what does that say about the way they're playing?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I mean, they're well-prepared. Especially when you're -- usually if you're at the top of your conference, you're not getting in those situations a lot in games. Or you're practicing those in-game things so that means you're doing that in practice every day.

Everybody knows the state change you feel, the adrenaline that's going on.

For them to have the composure -- you know, I thought Flau'Jae really contested and really tried to chase her off the line, and for her to have the composure and sidestep that and have it go in. Our players were going crazy.

Compliment to them. Obviously LSU's a really, really good team, and the fact that they were able to make that happen -- and I haven't seen that many that go around the rim that much and go in. But what a great moment. She'll never forget that.

Q. Kim said before the game against Duke that obviously they played them before and they're playing with a lot more confidence. You said obviously they're playing --

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely.

Q. What has been different about them, because obviously when you played them in November, December, they had that slow start, and now they're just roaring and after last night's performance and all that. What are you seeing that's the biggest difference in the Duke team right now?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think it's -- we have a saying in our program that you never outperform your self-image. I think what they believe to be true about themselves has really grown.

They have the same talent, most of the same talent pieces with a few adjustments. I think they just grew in their confidence, and I think they earned that. Nobody gave that to them, in my opinion. I'm obviously not in their practices

every day.

But credit to their staff. It's not easy to do in those really rocky beginning moments to just fight for a little bit more belief and a little bit more skill improvement and a little bit more tactical efficiency.

I have a lot of respect. As a leadership group, that's really difficult. And as young people, it's really difficult to stay the course.

Jon Gordon works a lot with our team. He talks about high state of mind, low state of mind. And most people miss out on high state of mind because they jump ship when they're in the low state, right before it's about to come back up.

And I give them a lot of credit for what they've earned because they stayed the course.

Q. You look at the difference between this year's team and last year's team, and one of the things that stands out, obviously, is Charlisse and Gianna being here -- I know Charlisse was here last year but not playing. They're coming in having different roles than what they had obviously in their previous teams. What's it been like to just having them be integrated into this kind of a role that they're in now with a group of other veteran players in your starting lineup?

CORI CLOSE: I think it tells you what their "why" is, what their purpose is, why they came here. It wasn't to get their own stats. It was to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

And I think every single person on this team has had to choose that at different moments and in different ways. If that was probably the thing that has been most fun about being around this group is that they have not wavered in that.

It could be the freshmen going, this is really hard and on any other team I'd be getting a lot more opportunity. But I'm going to choose to be selfless and learn from this incredible group of role models.

It could be somebody having a tough shooting night, somebody getting in foul trouble, somebody just not having the same kind of match-up. I mean, this would be a completely different game.

We knew we had to play small against Minnesota. I think we're going to have to play a lot bigger, and it's going to be much more of a rebounding match and a slugfest with their inside players, and then chasing around their incredible guards.

But I think if you ever have a crack in -- it's not about me. It's about what does the team need from me and how do I add value today -- then it's not a very fun experience. But because they have chosen that over and over and over again and stacked days of selflessness, we're in a great position.

Q. I have a side question for you right now. How do you feel about the two-regional setup and how it has impacted the players?

CORI CLOSE: I had a feeling that might be coming. I think really it's a tough job because we want to honor the coverage that we've gotten with ESPN, and we think that it's so important that we get maximum exposure and coverage to our great game.

And I think we always have to look at that tug and pull of getting great coverage and then what sets up the game to be successful from a really high level of basketball being played.

I think that I was in favor of going to the two regional sites when that happened. I think every year we should look and go, where are we in our game, how did this play out efficiency-wise, from a student-athlete well-being side, is there some ways in which we can organize to make things a little bit more cohesive so teams aren't going back and forth from media coverage to practices later and those kinds of things?

I think I understand exactly why we did this at the time, but I also think we have to be constantly nimble to go, does this serve our game best now? And is there any small tweaks that would make it run more efficiently?

It's a really hard combination to find. We've been begging for years for maximum coverage. We've been begging for parity. We've been begging for opportunities for other teams to rise up and challenge at the highest levels, and we've gotten that.

And I think we've got to look at, okay, how is attendance factoring in, how is the sequencing of the scheduling going, how do we maybe make some changes to fit that?

But I think it's really hard to evaluate in the moment. But I do think it deserves to have some significant stakeholders after it's over go, hey, can we have some input on how it's affecting us? And let's have some collaboration about how we can continue to move our game forward.

Q. When you were talking before, how much do you work on situations at the end of the game because you

haven't had many close ones yourself this year?

CORI CLOSE: Yeah, every single day.

Q. And the second part, to follow up on that question, it wasn't just timing. The balls are brand new for these games, and you guys missed probably some shots you normally would hit, I would think and other things of that nature. When you were out in Albany, I think, two years ago, you had the 8:00 a.m. press conference, which I think it was 5:00 a.m. West Coast time. And you even made comments how the media was up at 5 a.m., which is great to see. Are there ways to fix this? You're a WBCA former president. So you've seen it.

CORI CLOSE: It's really difficult because not only that time is that we had a mechanical issue with our plane and we got in, we didn't even get in till 1:00 a.m. East Coast time and then we're up a few hours later.

I think you've got to create, it's really hard because you're having to create structure and timing before you know what the bracket's going to look like and what the teams, where they're coming from. But I do think we need to have some common sense in that, like, are there ways to accommodate that, or do you want to put some travel things in so that you don't put teams in tough positions?

This is the first time I've ever been in the West Coast time zone the entire time. It's never happened in my career. But I think have you to just sort of think about how does that play out and what does that look like.

It was tough. And I do think it really affected our ability to play our best. And that's what you want, right, in all of this is, how is our structure enabling our student-athletes to play their best basketball on the biggest stages?

I do think there are some tweaks to be made if we were to really proactively look at that logistically.

In terms of special situations, we literally work on it 15 minutes every single day, whether it be -- just put them in every single scenario we can possibly think of.

It's really hard. I'm an absolute jerk in those because it's hard to create the feeling that they're going to have, you know, just the state change that happens internally. So I just try to make it as uncomfortable for them as they possibly can be in practice.

But the test will come, right, in those moments. I thought Duke passed a big test in how they handled theirs at the end of the game. And we would hope to be able to have those same results if we're in those positions.

Q. I feel like this team has two kind of distinct sides where it's either high-level locked in or they're having a ridiculous amount of fun. How do you see these girls kind of compartmentalize those two sides of themselves, and how does it benefit the team?

CORI CLOSE: I think it's different for different people. I think helping them know -- we work all year long to know when are you at your best? And some players really need that lightness, and they're going to be better that way.

Some players probably need to -- we call it their warrior dial. Some of them need to dial it up and some of them need to dial it back. Part of that is their dance party before they go out or whatever they choose to do.

Coach Wooden taught me this. He said, "The biggest form of partiality is to treat every player the same." That doesn't mean the standard changes. The expectation of do your job, the expectation of preparing really, really well.

But the style doesn't always have to be the same. You know who taught me that the most is Michaela Onyenwere, who's on our staff now. I remember she had this, like, goofy joy about her before every game. And at first when she was a freshman, I was, like, she is just not locked in.

And she taught me, she was one of the most intense players when that tip came up, but she was at her best when she had that kind of lightness and joy.

And I think I realized that I needed to adjust in that, in that you have to develop genuine relationships and really get to know your players. And you have to do that while still holding the standard consistently even if the style might be different.

Q. I'll take us off road for a second. You alluded to it. Having the Final Four in Phoenix, it's the first time we've been west of the Rockies since 1999. As a West Coast person, as a West Coast coach -- I begged Larry Scott to bring a Final Four when he was the commissioner of the Pac-12 for years -- how important is it to place the game's biggest showcase on the West Coast?

CORI CLOSE: I think we need to have balance in that. I think it's important to have parity because it allows you to just build your fan base across the country.

I do think these are really important, if we're going to have these in these situations, really important to market it well, to have the towns and the cities show up in a major way, to have collaboration.

But I think the difficult part is there's so many fewer universities west of the Mississippi than there are east. But I think that if you really want national parity year in and year out you have to have balance.

And really the problem has been that we've not had enough West Coast cities that have been willing to bid. We need to continue to encourage that. We need the sports commissions in those different cities to really come alongside and help with that process.

But I just think if you look at the growth of the men's side, there's just been balance in that bid process and where those sites go. And I think we could use -- I'm not a proponent of following the men all the time -- but I do think in that way, as they have grown, I think that's been part of that. I think if we can have balance and have more cities do a great job in the Western time zone, I think that not only is good for West Coast schools, I think it's good for the growth of the game.

Q. Charlisse's and Gianna's dance videos have gone viral throughout the Internet. Which one has been your favorite dance? And how much confidence do you get knowing those off-the-court activities bring this group closer?

CORI CLOSE: I just think, one of the things that I always say in recruiting is, go to the place that you're going to -- go to the place that's going to be there for you on your hard days and where you can create the most powerful "remember whens." Remember when we did that? Remember when we did this?

And I've just gotten so much joy out of knowing that, number one, that's going to be a lifelong friendship that has been formed; number two, they have created some incredible powerful "remember whens."

And so I think it's been hilarious. I don't know if I have a favorite, but the last one where they did the whole choreography where, like, they brought a choreographer in there and they taught Gianna and Charlisse this dance. I was like, okay, and then just out practice at the end, Charlisse was -- excuse me, Gianna was trying to teach Michaela. So I was, like, we're going to another level.

But I think that has said so much about Gianna that she is comfortable in her own skin to sort of go, okay, I'm just going to go for this, you know? And I don't think I could have done that at that age. But I just think this has got to be an incredibly fun experience while we're pursuing our craft at the highest levels.

I don't think at any level, whether you're in the WNBA Finals or you're in the Final Four competing for a national championship, I think there's still room for both. And I hope we don't ever lose sight that this is supposed to be a really fun, life-changing experience.

Q. Kiki Rice has had a career year this season in points, rebounds, field goal percentage. What can you say about her performance, not only last night, but across the season? And in what way do you feel she's improved her game the most?

CORI CLOSE: Well, that's hard. I would say I think my number one thing that I go to is her improvement on the defensive end. She's taken a lot of pride in being a great defender, contributing on the glass. I think I would go to that, number one.

As I've said this in previous media situations, she had surgery on April 15th last year and was out for six months. The way she found intentional ways to grow in spite of her return-to-play protocols that she had to observe, the way she had extra film study, the way that she worked on her footwork with our strength coach, Ash, she's just so intentional about everything that she does. I think that's what's playing out for her.

Also, and I think she would be the first to say, to give so much credit to her relationship in player development with coach Tasha Brown. They just have a connection. And Kiki can't get enough. I mean, every single day I have to say, there will be no extra workouts today, because she's just going to pursue them at every turn. And I think they have developed such a great collaborative relationship.

99 percent of the credit goes to Kiki and her work ethic and intentionality. But I also have to give credit to Tasha Brown and our video team and how they've come alongside her as well. I think they've been spectacular.

Q. I wanted to follow up on a moment from last night where that final rotation you had, kind of what the future of the program is going to be with Chrizzy and Lena and Sienna and Amanda, and then having Charlisse there as the field general. It's something you've done a few times this season, but what insights have you gained from just that core group and what they've been able to do kind of in these big moments?

CORI CLOSE: I think Lena has shown amazing segments of what you can expect from the future, both on offense and on defense -- fearlessness, right, hitting those shots when she comes in.

I think she's rotated and had a passion play and a block in

her first defensive rotation both of the last two games.

Sienna just continues to grow. Her basketball IQ is amazing.

But my favorite was Chrizzy last night because Chrizzy has a really hard role, and she was the last one added to our roster in a very experienced group. I showed her the clip when she got on the bus, I showed her the clip of her making shot and watching the bench react to her.

I said, they react that way because they love you that much, and they're so excited to celebrate you because you have sacrificed for them, and they want to give you your due and your moment.

I wanted her to really pause and see what her teammates see in her. And that was, I think, worth more than anything.

I think all of those players that are returning, including Timea and Amanda, they've been methodical about going what does it look like for me to add value to the team today, and how can I help it grow me for my future?

That's been a hard thing to do throughout the year, but that growth mindset that they have chosen will pay dividends.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UCLA student-athletes Gianna Kneepkens and Charlisse Leger-Walker.

Q. How much assessment did you do in making a decision to come to UCLA about what your roles would be, compared to what your roles had been someplace else?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think that definitely goes into it. You have to lay out all the cards when you're in the transfer portal.

For me, it was just knowing my values and what I wanted in my next program. So I think I was just focused on going to a place where I know I would be with great people and I could grow as a person and as a player.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think similar for me, that's definitely a big factor. Coming to a program also where you are surrounded by elite players, and at the end of the day we want to win and be a part of a program that can do that.

And whatever that role is that we have to adjust to throughout the season, I think, we really bought into that, or personally -- well, we both did -- but we tried to buy into that.

And then there's just a lot of other factors that go into that decision, but how it plays out throughout the season is kind of dependent on game to game, different schemes.

Q. I asked this of your other graduating members. So I'll ask you too. What is it going to be like in a couple of months when you are not playing together and you're going to be in the WNBA? What is that moment going to be like?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Sad.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Sad.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Sad just because we love each other's presence so much. But I think I'm just going to be so proud of everyone. I think when you love and care about people so much, when they do great things, like, you celebrate, too, because you just feel that connection.

So we're definitely just trying to stay super present and enjoy every practice we have, every hangout we have, because it's been fast.

Q. To follow up on changing roles and all of that, in the position that you guys are in now for this team, where have each of you kind of seen your game evolve and grow, just having the opportunity to take on a different role?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think for me it's really tapping into my strength of being a really great facilitator, really great connector out there on the court and understanding who I am surrounded by and who I'm playing with.

I think we're at that point in the season where you have to really buy into your team's game plan, your role on that team for us to be successful. And we have worked on that this whole year.

So, for me, just being able to be that connector for us and make sure we're getting the best shots possible, being a communicator on the defensive end and just bringing that energy every game. Like, I have to be really consistent in that. So for me personally, that's what I would say.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I think for me, it's just learning to play with great players. If that's finding them when they're open, then I'll do that. Or if I need to take my shot, I'll do that, too.

So just doing whatever the team needs and understanding

the moment, time and score. I think, like we kind of mentioned, I think everybody's bought into that, and I think that's been a strength of ours this season.

Q. Charlisse, we've all seen the videos. I think I came into the locker room yesterday and you were doing a TikTok dance with Gabby. I saw you walking around with your camera. You've always had this big personality, but you've really expanded it and doing all this stuff off the court. I'm wondering, how has that developed for you and sort of what you put into it and the "why" of why you decided to sort of grow this image of yours into this sort of bigger thing this last couple of years at UCLA?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think it was just kind of intentional focus when I came to UCLA. I wanted to take advantage of the resources that we have here. Just being in L.A., obviously there's a lot of opportunity. I think this team, just the personalities that we have, we do have so many different big personalities.

So it's just kind of easy when you're surrounded by people who also love to do that, you feel more comfortable in that environment.

So I think for me it's also been a way to have the fun and the balance of just enjoying time with each other and doing different things outside of basketball, knowing that basketball is the main thing. But it's just been a fun way for me to connect, especially with my teammates and make them do some fun, cool things along the way too.

Q. For both of you who, what challenges does Duke present to you on the court tomorrow? And the other part, is the leadership, having so many seniors that have had different experiences, how helpful is it to have so many good veteran voices to sort of, if there are adversity moments, to chime in, so to speak?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: As far as the game tomorrow, I think I'm really excited for the match-up. Duke's a great team. We saw them earlier this season. But they're a new team. They've grown.

We're also a new team. We've grown, too. I think it's a really great match-up. I think they bring a certain type of defensive pressure that we have to prepare for. And then they have a lot of threats on offense.

So it's going to be a really exciting match-up. And I'm just grateful to have another opportunity to play.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think one thing that obviously helps us, kind of what you spoke to, is that leadership experience, having a lot of seniors out there on the court and just have played a lot of basketball. We understand, you know, this moment, and we understand that the details and everything that we've done to get to this point matters.

We just have to be really collectively locked in. We do a really good job at reminding each other to stay present and kind of had that next-play speed mentality. So I think it's not changing anything super drastic, but just making sure we hone into the little things that we say every day.

Q. Charlisse, I'm curious what you feel you've learned last year? I think it's always difficult to switch programs, but also to be injured and rehabbing during that process. Being on the sidelines for that year, what you learned, how you grew from it.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think one of the biggest things I probably took away from that is you can impact the game in so many different ways other than just scoring or being out there playing.

Obviously sitting on the sideline, being forced to kind of just watch, I had to find a way to still have that impact. I credit a lot to our coaches, Coach Cori in particular, she was always asking for my opinion or asking what I was seeing out there. Obviously, as a point guard, I have to understand the game in certain ways and understand dynamics and reading schemes and different things like that.

So I think being kind of more on the sideline allowed me to have that bird's-eye view of a team and how especially UCLA plays.

I honestly think it was, in hindsight, one of the best things to sit out last year because it just allowed me to build those relationships, understand the scheme at a much deeper level, so when I came out and played this year, it almost was as if I had been here before and it wasn't actually the first time I was stepping out there in a Bruin uniform.

Just taking that year as a big learning opportunity and kind of seeing things from a wider perspective.

Q. Getting back to last night a little bit. When offensively things aren't clicking the way they were in the first half, but then the defense comes in. Gianna, Coach Close mentioned that last night might have been one of your best defensive games of the season. What does that say just about the multi-facetedness of this team and multitude of ways that at any position you guys can affect the game?

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think it's super important. I think we've said all year that our foundation has to be our defensive effort, because in basketball, it's inevitable that you're going to have a bad shooting game. You're going to miss shots that you normally make. So if you put all your focus in that, you're going to be up and down all season. But when you can control your effort on defense. So we've just really tried to focus on that.

And I think we used our length last night, and we've just been trying to do that all season.

Q. Gianna, what is it about Charlisse's personality that just sort of brings out the best in this team, and how she compares to some of the other point guards you've played with? Because it just seems she brings this group together both on and off the court with just who she is.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: I could sit here all day and say good things about Charlisse. I think she just knows how to connect to people, no matter, like anyone else's personality, she knows what to say to them and just how to connect with them.

She just brings a lightness and a joy out of everyone. So even in moments where it's tough, I feel we can count on Charlisse to bring it up for us.

She's just been an awesome teammate, an awesome friend that I know I'll have for the rest of my life. I'm just grateful to have the opportunity to play with her.

Q. Christina got in the game yesterday, got her first points. You guys celebrated that a bit. What did that kind of mean to see her get that moment like that? And what have you seen from her throughout the year as far as her development? You know, she doesn't get to play as much.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I think it was a huge moment for her and for our team. We see Chrizzy in the gym every single day before practice, after practice, putting in the work, getting extra shots up, and she really is one of those players who are going to do everything that they can to be the best version of themselves.

And we need everyone to do that, to be the best version of themselves for the team as well. And I'm just so happy that she gets rewarded in that way.

You don't get a lot of opportunities all the time to have big moments in March. So for her to get that as a freshman, well, you could see it, the reaction from our team. And her just also having the confidence to get out there and shoot that. There was no hesitation.

And we see that every day in practice. So for her to come out and have that moment, we were all just really proud and happy for her.

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