

NCAA Women's Regional Semifinals and Finals: Albany

Friday, March 29, 2019
Albany, New York

Cori Close Japreece Dean Kennedy Burke UCLA Bruins

UConn - 69, UCLA - 61

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll ask that you provide an opening statement, and then we'll have questions for the student-athletes.

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely. I don't know what to say other than that talk in the locker room, I've been doing this 26 years, and it doesn't get any easier. I asked the team, you know, we lost to Loyola Marymount, who's a good team, lots of respect for them at the beginning of the year, but if I had told them if they would stay focused on the process and keep a growth mindset and get better and give to each other every day that they could end up playing at this level and competing at this level, possession by possession, with UConn, would they have thought that was possible, and I'm not sure they would have been able to dream that big at that point when we were really disappointed after our opening game.

And to watch them, they really taught this -- I think I said this yesterday, but they just continued to do it. They taught this old lady about all the things that I say out loud, but they made it go a little deeper in my heart about what can happen if you stay focused on getting better every day and truly making a difference in each other's lives as teammates. If you're a good teammate and you grow every day, something special can happen.

And I believed it, and I've seen it over time, but they really seared it on my heart.

You know, it's hard because we didn't come to play close. We came to compete to win, and we believed it and fought for it. But all year long, and especially in the postseason, I've told them over and over again to be where your feet are moment by moment and don't worry about the past or what could or could not happen



in the future and just make sure you finish empty.

As their head coach, I could look them in the eye and I could say: You can have peace. You finished empty. And as a head coach, that's all I can ask for.

Q. Kennedy, that fourth quarter you guys were up one, and I think they scored the first six and then went on a 15-4 run. Was it something they did, or what was the difference in that fourth quarter that got them over the hump?

KENNEDY BURKE: The biggest difference was our defense, and that's what we're known for. We made some huge stops. I think we did have like four stops in a row, and that made the change in the game.

Q. Japreece, you and Cori spoke at halftime before you guys went into the locker room. I'm curious what that conversation was like and how you sort of took that into the third quarter where you guys made the run that you did.

JAPREECE DEAN: She just encouraged me, like she always does, and just told me to stay aggressive despite my shooting and just to encourage the team and lead and just stay on attack mode.

Q. Kennedy and Japreece, I was just wondering, now that the season is over, what are you kind of most proud of of the team, sort of reflecting back?
KENNEDY BURKE: You said individually or as a team?

Q. As a team.

KENNEDY BURKE: I just think that this particular year, this team was really special. Even though we didn't start off well, we showed that we could fight and that we could compete with any team. And this team is going to go a long way next year, and I'm excited for them.

JAPREECE DEAN: Yeah, I'm just proud of how we kept going despite the beginning of our season and what outsiders were saying and who we lost and who we don't have and how people stepped up into different roles and how we just stayed level headed through any game we played.

I felt like the Pac-12 got us ready for these type of games, and it was just amazing to see how people stepped up and how people led, and it was just great.

run, so I think it was a great tactic just to slow us down.

Q. Japreece, getting that extra year of eligibility, does that make it easier when you think about sort of what you've built and what there is left to do? And, Kennedy, I'm curious if you can reflect on what the culture is that's been built that once you got that extra year, there's a dog pile and there's such joy obviously that went along with that?

JAPREECE DEAN: I think the year is great, but I mean, right now it obviously hurts that we lost the game, so I'm not really thinking about the extra year. But credit everyone that helped me and supported me through that process to get an extra year, and I appreciate my teammates for being happy for me. But as far as right now I'm just kind of reflecting on this season.

KENNEDY BURKE: When I heard that -- when we heard that Japreece was going to get an extra year, I was just excited for the team. And even though when we heard the news, it was still like during the time where we were preparing for this tournament, I just knew that she would take us all the way, a long ways. And I'm just excited for her, and she's going to lead this team next year, and she's going to do great things for them.

Q. Cori, same thing I asked Kennedy; that run to start the fourth quarter, was it just defensive stops they were getting? What was the difference in that?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think they -- their strength is their offensive execution, and I thought they asserted the will of their strength more than our strength, which is defense, rebounding, getting downhill in transition. Right? So which team can play to their strengths in those pressurized moments, and the reality is they played to theirs.

We had to stop switching. We went to something completely different where we had three people that were switching screens and two people that were chasing, and you know, credit them; I also thought the big difference was some of those big shots by Dangerfield. Those were really the backbreakers. They came in -- I thought we regrouped after their 6-0 run, and I think we scored, and I still had a good confidence about us.

But I saw our demeanor change when Dangerfield hit a couple of those big shots late in the shot clock, and a couple of them were just good defense, better offense. I thought that's when I saw sort of a little bit of doubt creep in our eyes.

Q. Kind of building on to that, you controlled the pace throughout, even though you're a running

Q. When Lindsey Corsaro hit that three at the top of the circle and you go up by five, what's going through your head?

KENNEDY BURKE: I think in that moment I was just excited for this team because Lindsey hit a big shot, and we can count on her to make those big shots in the games, and we just had to continue that on the defensive end.

Even though things didn't go our way, I'm still proud of her confidence, and just like throughout this entire year she's always been a leader for us, and I'm just really proud of her.

JAPREECE DEAN: I think mostly after that stop I was just thinking about defense and trying to get another stop so we could go on our run and don't let them go on theirs. So mostly just trying to get a stop after that big shot.

Q. I was wondering if you could both speak about the house that Coach Cori talks about throughout the whole season, this house that you guys are building, and kind of even though you guys fell short today, what did that house look like to you guys and what did that mean to you guys?

JAPREECE DEAN: I think we built a mansion, honestly. People stepped up, like I said before, into huge roles, and no one was scared and no one backed down, and like I could respect that so much. The house just consists of, I don't know, just people doing different things and staying together and being one and being expected to win games and trusting the process.

She never wavered when we were losing games in the beginning. She knew what we could do, and credit to Coach Cori, she kept us encouraged, and we decided that we were going to be encouraged and stay together.

KENNEDY BURKE: Yeah, I would have to agree with her. I think the biggest thing was just believing in ourselves, having confidence in ourselves. And yeah.

Q. After you guys went up and they went to a 1-3-1 press and they asserted Olivia, how did that affect your offense during the second half?

KENNEDY BURKE: I think when they made that change in their defense, we -- if someone drives, we weren't really moving off of the ball. I think we were standing and watching a lot, and it just made us throw up shots that we didn't really want. But I think overall we just showed fight.

JAPREECE DEAN: I would just say it slowed us down. I think he knows that we can get out in transition and

team and you kept them deep into the shot clock. But in the fourth quarter it didn't work so well.
CORI CLOSE: No, it didn't.

Q. What happened there?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think we weren't able to control the flow on offense, and to your question about the press, it really put us in a more standstill, one pass, make a read, and there was not a lot of rhythm.

What you saw in their offense was a lot of rhythm, was a lot of fluidity, and when they did their press and we sort of got on our heels, we didn't ever get our rhythm back and getting players shots in rhythm.

Credit their defense; they really stepped up and made what we wanted to run hard. And obviously their game plan was to give us jumpers and see if we could hit them, and we had a harder time with that today. That's about as worst game of shooting as we've had in a long time. I didn't think we could have 26 percent again in the second half.

But credit them, their defense. They rolled the dice on that, and it worked for them. And it wasn't our best shooting night. The reality is I think they played in a rhythm and fluidity, and we weren't able to find ours after that point.

Q. Obviously you said 26 years, it doesn't get easier at the end. But you have a different group and a different spot, and there's so much talent coming back next year and a great class coming in. I guess I wonder whether you process it differently now, and is it easier or just different to process it in the coming days?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it'll be easier in a couple weeks. You know, I think the reality is that we didn't -- I just love this group of young women. So right now all I'm thinking about is these young women and my responsibility to lead them in our mission as a program and to help them be their best as young women, as representatives of the university, as students and, of course, as competitive athletes.

I'm excited about what we've had. I've been excited about it all year and very thankful we're now at a place in our program where our culture is feeding itself and our recruiting is becoming very consistent.

I have a lot to be proud of in terms of what my staff -- really, they get so much credit for what we have built, but right now I see the eyes on the faces of these young women that I love very much and that are very disappointed but have grown immensely.

Q. What will you remember the most about this

season reflecting on this team?

CORI CLOSE: One of our core values is a growth mindset, and I also will -- and they did that. They just every week got better. Every week -- it got to the point about mid-January. I started texting the leadership group the day before our week started and said, What does our emphasis need to be this week?

And the first part of the year, the staff would come up with that, like what are the musts, how do we have to grow this week. And from about mid-January on, our leadership group decided that. And they were really the drivers of the growth of this team.

The other thing I'll remember about this team is that they didn't let anyone on the outside define who they could become. They didn't let a lack of expectation or too much expectation -- they were like, no, I'm going to define who I can become individually, and we are going to define ourselves what we can become collectively.

You know, it takes a lot of guts as an 18- to 23-year-old in this day and age, and I'm really proud of how they learned to define who they wanted to be, and that's something that's not only helped our team this year, but that's going to stay with them for the rest of their lives, and I'm really thankful that they have that moment to refer to.

Q. I saw you in the Bridgeport bracket when you guys upset Maryland. Now you come back this year and you beat Maryland, and people kind of seemed like it was an upset because you were a No. 6 seed, and then coming in and going against UConn, people probably felt like you were going to get blown out. But you always give UConn a fight. You don't go away. Coming in, did you feel like you were getting the respect that you deserve?

CORI CLOSE: I don't know. I just always -- Coach Wooden had a quote that if you focus on things that are out of your control, it adversely affects the things that are under your control, and I just can't control that.

I think it goes back to what I just said in terms of we just didn't let that stuff define us. We really believed in the match-up. We believed in if we played to our best, that we could win.

We had a period of about six minutes that we didn't play our best, and we didn't win. But I don't really think that ever fazed us, honestly. Every day I would just look in their eyes and are they ready to battle again for another week, and they were ready. Every time I looked at them, they responded.

We have a phrase about, and we talked about it several times in the game, is all we can control is our

R, which is our response. And if you don't like your outcome, then you'd better change your R. Over and over again, these women just responded, over and over. I didn't really give it a second thought, and I don't think our players did, either.

Q. Coach, I asked the players this same question, when Lindsey Corsaro hit that three to put you up by five, what's going through your head knowing that you had completed sort of a comeback in the sense of you're back in the game, you're up five? What's going through your head in terms of holding UConn?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think I thought the same thing as Japreece. I don't think we really ride the waves of that. I think if we did, we were going to be in big trouble. I think it was really a possession-by-possession game. Obviously as those things happen, you believe deeper and deeper, like we can do this. And so I'd be lying if it didn't fuel our belief. I'm sure it did. But I really do think it was a next-play mentality, you know, what is required of me for this possession.

So, you know, yeah, but I didn't think we started believing then. I think we believed throughout, and maybe it grew, but I think it was just what do I need to do to help our team get one more stop.

Q. You talked about empowering your leadership team. There was a time-out when we were down 55-50. You delayed about a minute before you went over, you let the players speak and then you went in. Was that the idea behind it empowering the leadership team?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think always. At this point in the year, I can't control it all. I think all year long, we don't want to have a program that has a bunch of plays and that I have to call the most brilliant game in order for us to win. I want our players to not only feel empowered but to be equipped with their skill, with their belief, with their confidence, with their communication.

And I think in March players have got to be feeling empowered to make plays. I did the same thing at halftime. I said, What are you guys talking about? What are you seeing? And I trust them. They've earned that trust. I didn't give them that trust, they earned that trust, and I want them -- I think about most of them want to go on and play professional basketball, so I have a parallel mission to help us reach our potential, to help them grow as people and then to prepare them for their next set of dreams.

At the next level we've got to think and make plays and adjust to coaches and different styles quickly, and they've got to be empowered to think on their own if they want to make those next steps.

Q. You're no stranger to seeing players make that leap to the W; obviously Napheesa Collier is on her way. What do you see as her game at the next level? What do you think she'll do best for her WNBA team when she gets there?

CORI CLOSE: Well, it's interesting. She's a little bit different than Kennedy Burke in some ways but similar in others. They're very versatile. I think it's going to depend on who drafts her and what system she is. But I think that her ability to make an impact no matter where she goes or what system she's in, she's a machine. She is so active away from the ball, she plays great defense on the perimeter as well as in the post. You know, her post game was obviously where they took advantage tonight, but over the course of scouting her ability to take the ball off the bounce and attack that way, as she grows in her confidence to shooting the ball, as well, she's just scratching the surface.

But her consistency of tempo and her ability to affect the game in so many different ways, you know, she's obviously got a really bright future.

But I feel similarly about Kennedy Burke. I think she's an elite defender and she's a match-up nightmare, and she's just scratching the surface, as well. So I think you see two really versatile players that are going to make their impact in the WNBA.