

Big Ten Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 8, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

UCLA Bruins

Cori Close

Lauren Betts

Kiki Rice

Postgame Press Conference



UCLA 96, Iowa 45

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the Big Ten champions UCLA to our press conference. Coach Cori Close, the Big Ten Coach of the Year and student-athlete Lauren Betts, the Big Ten Player of the Year, and Kiki Rice, the Most Outstanding Player of this year's Big Ten Tournament.

CORI CLOSE: It's sort of -- first of all, this means a lot because the Big Ten prepared us, and these great coaches -- Jan Jansen is one of my favorites. She, I think, does an incredible job. What she's done there in her first two years is remarkable.

For us to come out the way we did, it means a lot because we're doing it against really good teams. So we're really grateful to be a part of the Big Ten, and we have lots of respect for everybody in this conference.

I expected this, so I am joyful and full of gratitude, humbly wanting to thank the people in this program and this university to support us to pursue this level of excellence.

I just want to say thank you to the incredible players that really fulfilled their mission and stayed committed to the hard character qualities that we knew we needed to make this kind of run. But at the same time, we're going to enjoy it because we know we have another day coming up to earn another 1-0, and that's really what we're going to do next.

Q. Lauren, I'm just curious what's it been like to kind of see Kiki grow these last couple of years, and what's it been like to see a performance like today where she ends up most outstanding player?

LAUREN BETTS: I'm so proud of Ki. She observes everything and all the accomplishments and all the praise. She's worked her butt off for the past three years. She's the hardest worker I know. A lot of the work that you guys don't see, she's constantly just in the gym trying to get better.

What I love most is she's one of the most selfless people I've ever played with. She really could care less about all of the attention. She just wants to win games. She's always there for her teammates. I'm so grateful I get to be her teammate and her friend. She's amazing.

Q. Lauren, was that the same dance routine that you did the other day?

LAUREN BETTS: It sure was. It sure was, yeah. (Laughter).

Q. Was that spontaneous, or did you know you were going to do that?

LAUREN BETTS: I had no clue. Gabs looked at me and she said, they're playing our music, and we just went for it.

Q. So it just happened the same song was playing?

LAUREN BETTS: Oh, yeah.

Q. How incredible, just the joy and celebration, was winning this and going back to back?

LAUREN BETTS: I'm so proud of this group. Honestly, like Coach Cori said, I'm not really surprised because of the amount of work we've done in practice. We've been competing against ourselves all season and just constantly trying to get better every single day. When you have moments like these, you just feel really prepared for it.

Everyone came out with a certain level of confidence that I just knew we were going to win.

Q. Lauren, I had a question for you about your sister today. She met every career high in this game, and she came in early, and she had a breakout



performance. Can you talk about her play today.

LAUREN BETTS: Oh, my gosh, yeah. Coach Cori came to the bench in the fourth quarter, like this is Sienna's world, and we're just living in it because it really did feel like that.

I'm just really proud of her because I know this season it's hard being a freshman on this team with these elite players. She continues to stay confident and ask for the ball and wants to get shots.

That's the type of energy we need. When you get to moments like these when you're in the game, she went in and did her job. Her attitude has been so amazing, so I'm just so happy for her.

Q. Kiki, I just want to ask, you've had such a great season. Like personally, where do you feel the most that you've improved so far?

KIKI RICE: Honestly, I first give a ton of credit to my teammates. I think this year the way that we moved the ball and everyone gets touches is so important for everyone and allows me to be successful.

For me, I think the biggest thing would be defensively. I worked a ton of that in the off-season and really stepped up to the challenge of guarding the other team's best perimeter player. I think me being challenged in that way, it's been a really great area of growth, and that's probably the area that I'm most proud of.

Q. I'm going to ask the coach this as well, but if my calculations are right, you've got 18 Quad 1 wins compared to UConn's 8. You've got 12 ranked 1 wins compared to UConn's 5. Do you think you deserve top overall seed?

KIKI RICE: Honestly, the decision is not up to us. We're a great team. We've done all we needed to do, and the committee will make that decision, but we're not focused on that. Whenever the RAC comes out, we'll see our path, who we need to focus on for each round, but that's not what we're focused on. We're not focused on what the committee decides.

Q. Lauren, I want to ask you, what's the one thing through this season that you've grown as a person and a player?

LAUREN BETTS: I think my steadiness. I mean, with so much that goes on outside of my control, you have rankings, you have people who talk about my career after college, and I can't worry about any of that because my

biggest focus is situations like this, winning championships and winning games and doing whatever my team needs me to do.

With everything going on, I'm really proud of how I've just stepped into the leadership role and just stayed very consistent because it's not easy. I know I have great people around me that remind me of who I am every day, and I could not be more thankful for this program.

Q. Obviously an amazing offensive performance, but you guys also had four players who had three steals each. How is it a collective defensive effort today from you guys?

KIKI RICE: Every single night we take pride in our defense, and I think that's what really ignited us today. We obviously knocked down shots, but I think the way we got after it defensively. When we can start like that, we can start with a lot of pressure, being the aggressors and dictating on the defensive end, it's going to help us and get us easier looks on offense.

I think that's the foundation and the backbone of our team, and we take pride in the way we defend. We have an anchor in the paint. So we always know our guards can put pressure on them and force them inside to Lauren. So proud of the group and how we defended.

Q. Two things. First of all, same one I asked your players about the Quad 1 wins, the rank wins. Do you deserve the No. 1 overall seed?

CORI CLOSE: I don't really care either. I think the biggest thing for us is that we've tried to really just decide to narrow our focus, and the reality is, when you focus on things out of your control, it will adversely affect the things under your control.

I think, if I put any energy towards that, I'm taking energy away from what it will actually take to get there.

I think our focus needs to be on the how. How do we play our best basketball in March? How do we learn from the previous year? How do we continue to fight to get one possession better every single day?

If I give energy to that, I'm not giving energy to something more important.

Q. Following up on that with the how, if what I read was correct, you said, "I actually don't think we're there yet," in the post-game interview. How can you play better than today, 51-point win over a really good team, right?

CORI CLOSE: I think you know as -- I think that's what my biggest commitment to this team needed to be this year is that I needed to hold the standard, even when the score or a game might say something different or someone on the outside might say how good we are. I think my biggest responsibility as the leader of this program is to hold the standard.

We were 0-for-9 on offensive rebound misses at halftime. We've never had a rebounding thing like that. I think the danger is, when you're really efficient offensively, you just think every shot's going in. The reality is on a night that you might not be as hot as we were tonight, you have to have the habits and the discipline to be able to chase offensive rebounds, get another passion play, find easier opportunities, set better screens.

I'm obviously pleased with the performance that we had tonight. We showed some really good things. But my job is still to hold the standard.

Q. Same thing about Kiki that I asked Lauren. What do you think has been her biggest growth point this season?

CORI CLOSE: I think I would also agree with her that defensively has been probably the most impactful growth thing that she's had, but Kiki -- people don't realize she was out for six months. She had surgery on April 15th last year and was out for six months.

So the work she did on her mentality -- film study, with leadership, using her voice, working on her handles when she could never have a shot. I just think it's her commitment to the details. I'm not surprised that she's playing this way because of the intentional work that she puts in.

But I do think the biggest thing, I think, has been probably her passing, her facilitation, as well as I --

(No audio.)

CORI CLOSE: Hello, we're back.

Sienna has really high expectations for herself. She's an incredibly hard worker. Not only did she have an unexpected injury that made her lose a whole lot of time in November, December. When other freshmen were working through those things, she didn't have that opportunity.

Then when you're entering in with a group of six potential first round draft picks ahead of you, I think seeing her joy

today and seeing some of her freedom and how she played, that was really rewarding to watch because I know how hard she's been fighting for her perspective to stay right, to just keep focusing on the next day.

That was probably one of my greatest joys today was being able to see that level of breakthrough. As a teacher, that's what you want, right? You want to see players that sort of find gears inside of them that maybe they didn't know they had, and I think Sienna is starting to discover those.

Q. Coach, can you speak to Charlissee? She had 23 points, 5 steals this week. Can you just speak to her contributions?

CORI CLOSE: I pulled her aside after, and I just said, you have been our glue. I think one of the reasons -- and her and Kiki have this great relationship and really feed off of each other. I also think one of the things that Kiki's been able to do is have different kinds of scoring catches this year because of Charlissee's presence on our team.

I remember last year thinking, I can't imagine what Charlissee's impact is going to be once she plays because she's already impacting us so much and she hasn't even played a game. So I could not be more grateful for her leadership, for her basketball IQ, for her scoring mentality. She is probably our most consistent defender off the ball and on the ball.

But she's our emotional glue. Pretty much everybody looks to Char when things need to get steadied. She's so trustworthy, and she has everybody's respect, including me.

Q. I've covered Hawkeye sports for basketball for four or five years now, and the Big Ten has some amazing basketball. We've seen that this week.

CORI CLOSE: Absolutely.

Q. And then there's UCLA. It is amazing to me. Is it the system? Is it talent? Is it the standard that you set? Today was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen covering women's basketball. It was amazing.

CORI CLOSE: That says a lot considering where you come from. So I appreciate the compliment.

I think it's a combination of everything. We hope that our mission and our commitment to do things the right way, that a by-product would be competitive greatness, as Coach Wooden would call it.

But it never is -- we talk a lot about actually surrendering the outcomes, and we're just really focused on loving each other well, having intentional growth every single day, and competing possession by possession. When you add really an incredible staff around me who selflessly sacrifices for the sake of our uncommon mission, and then you get really talented players that are willing to be hard workers and selfless, it's a pretty good combination.

I also have to thank our university, and my athletic director is right here, and I got a great e-mail from our chancellor. People ask me all the time what's the most rewarding part of coaching at UCLA? It's being able to look a parent in the eye and go, you know, there's not many places you could have this level of competitive excellence, this access to this kind of education and alumni network, and then have a style of play and a commitment to NIL that allows us to compete to be the very best.

It's a privilege to be able to lead an organization like that. So it's with great humility that I say thank you for your compliment, and I'm so thankful to be surrounded by amazing people that believe in our vision.

Q. How does going back to back kind of influence what you're feeling right now, and how would you kind of compare this one to last year?

CORI CLOSE: It's different. I think I just had to -- when I'm talking to myself today, I'm going, hey, trust the work. They're prepared. They're selfless. They've put in the time. And just sort of trusting in our foundation.

Last year it was we were broken, brokenhearted from our loss to USC at home from our regular season. It was this incredibly rewarding thing to watch them respond in that way, but it was just such a different process. It was everybody fighting to get back to unity and to put all of their individual things to the side for the sake of the team, and that was incredible to be a part of.

Hard to describe this one. It definitely feels different, but rewarding, and I'm full of gratitude nonetheless.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations again. Thank you. We wish you the best of luck.

CORI CLOSE: Thank you. I do want to say thank you to all the people behind the scenes in the Big Ten.

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THE MODERATOR: At this time we welcome Coach Jan Jensen and student-athletes Ava Heiden and Chit-Chat Wright. Coach, if you will make the opening statement.

JAN JENSEN: First off, major credit to UCLA, wire to wire, very impressive. I think the world of Cori and her staff. Just had them prepared and locked in and ready to roll.

What they've done this year has been extremely impressive. They were great today.

I also think you saw a lot of senior leadership on their end, a team that's been on a mission since the Final Four last year. They probably had a similar feel in their stomachs last year at the Final Four, which provided plenty of fuel for them this year with so much talent.

I think what you saw with the team with us, we got on our heels early. What you saw was, if you let that margin get a little too great, you can never really ever shrink it. Then with a younger team, which we're a lot younger than were older, it just got away from us -- mentally, emotionally, and certainly physically.

A lot of credit to them. I don't think I coached my best. I told the kids that. But I would hope that this loss does not define Iowa women's basketball season. I think they've been stellar all year.

I would say that I think anybody in the country, even though this ending, they still would have taken it. To be in a championship game in the premiere league, even though the way it ended wasn't great, what these people have accomplished with a lot of adversity -- Taylor McCabe got

hurt. She was my main outside scoring threat. Every play call was pretty much designed around her. We recalibrated, found a way to go on a winning streak, and end up in the big championship.

I'm really proud. Very disappointed, but more proud than disappointed.

Q. To either of you, what do you guys feel you were able to prove on that round of the championship game?

AVA HEIDEN: I think we were able to show our camaraderie as a team. Our program is built on blue collar plays and playing through assists and finding each other and sticking together.

So I think us being able to work our way up to this championship game was our demonstration of that.

CHIT-CHAT WRIGHT: I would just say just no matter the outcome, we just go out there, play our game, Iowa women's basketball. Whether we're up or down, and having that consistency as a team. Never shying away from the moment.

Q. Ava, it's not easy going up against experience and height, but you still managed to be efficient, only missing four shots. What does that say about your relentlessness and approach to the game?

AVA HEIDEN: I think it's a credit to my teammates. I can't get those shots -- on the block, I can't get those shots without Chat's passes or Taye Strem. That's just a credit to how good our team is at finding the post play.

Also, we've got some pretty great coaches. We've got Coach J, Coach Randi, Coach Lasondra. They're working us out, getting us better, and they really see the future, and they're striving to get us players to be the best we can be.

Q. Chit-Chat, despite the loss, you all had a great season, and you had an amazing season yourself. What have you learned about yourself throughout this year?



CHIT-CHAT WRIGHT: I would just say I've stepped into this leadership role. I knew that with coming here, committing that I would take on a bigger role, and just being a little bit more vocal. I've seen a lot of growth in that area. Just really stepping into that moment.

Even though I didn't knock down the shots and I really wanted to, just being able to take those shots and have pride that I'm going to make it and knock it down next time, that's something I've grown into as well.

Q. Can either of you speak to Addie's impact, what she's been bringing to the team over the course of the past few weeks?

AVA HEIDEN: Yeah, Addie is a great player. She has a really high clip at the 3-point line. As a freshman, it's hard to be thrust into a game where there's all this athleticism and strength and the pace of the game is quicker. So I think she's doing a really good job learning on the fly and getting better through that.

CHIT-CHAT WRIGHT: She brings a lot to the game, and I know a lot of people put -- there's a lot of pressure on her coming in as an McDonald's All-American, but she continues to work every day just as hard as everyone else, and it shows on the court as well.

Q. For both players, can you explain what made UCLA's offense so difficult to stop?

JAN JENSEN: I can take it. There's just not a lot of weaknesses. You can try to front Betts, and you can try to help off the corner, but they're going to find the person that's a pretty good 3-point scorer. Her sister coming in, you might have a little dropoff. What was she today, 7 for 8, right? They just don't have a lot of weaknesses offensively.

They can put it on the bounce. They can score interior. They can score at will. They can probably just throw it to Betts most of the time and score. And they have Kiki Rice, a premier point guard. So they just have a lot of weapons. They'll make you pay for a gamble, but you have to pick sometimes what you're going to do, if you're going to front, if you're going to play behind, if you're going to double. So they make you pay for that.

Then on top of it, typically you just make some mistakes in a game just because you're human. When you make a mistake on a closeout or we had a bad rotation, they're going to make you pay for it.

Also, we're pretty decent in transition defense. This was as

poor as I've seen us play transition defense this whole season, but I do think that is sometimes the mark of a younger team. You just can't reel it in mentally. You're just forgetting to hustle back. You have to take Kneepkens, even if you're a post player, because you know she's going to jack it. We just weren't as headstrong as we could have been. But it's just their depth.

If the pundits are right, they say they're all going to the league, right, which is pretty impressive. Most of us have one or two go, but they have a lineup like that.

Q. Following what's happened these last few days in this Big Ten tournament, what is your message heading into the NCAA Tournament?

JAN JENSEN: I think the big thing I have to do is make sure that everybody else is going to make a major deal about this, and I probably will too, but I can't let them because they've had a heck of a year.

It really wasn't our day. I don't think we should have lost by this margin. I really don't. We just let it get away from us, and that's on me.

I do think UCLA is very, very good. So we just have to take our licking, and we have to just understand that we played a great, great team, and we weren't nearly at our best, but I've got to focus on that glass that's half full because these guys did a lot of things this year that a lot of people didn't think they would ever do.

It's unfortunate this ending had to be quite so lopsided. But if you take that out of it, this team has really done a lot of great things. I hope we'll use this disappointment and make us better.

One of my favorite quotes is disappointments and setbacks make losers bitter, but they make winners better. I would just be surprised if this group didn't let it make them better.

Q. You mentioned Kiki Rice earlier. From an opposing coach's perspective, what makes her so difficult to deal with?

JAN JENSEN: She's just a three-level scorer. She's strong. She's big. She's tall. She's confident. She can defend full court. She can pull it behind -- you go below her ball screen, you chase over the top of it, she can get into the rim. She can hit a 3. It's not her favorite thing, maybe her strongest thing, but she can do it better than most people in the country.

She's just heady and a leader. Definitely a coach on the floor. She talks. She leads. She's calm. She's steady.

So that type of leadership, with everybody else they have, that's a pretty lethal leader.

Q. Despite the result, this is the sixth time you guys have played in this game in the last eight years. Can you talk about what this means to you to be a staple at the top of the conference for so long?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, I think I am proud of that. We've had a lot of success in this tournament. It's hard to get here. It's just hard. March is fun; it's hard. Sleepless nights and quick adjustments.

I'm thinking about today we had that 8:00 shootaround, and we kind of polled our team and elected to get a little sleep. You just don't have time to go over different actions, so you kind of do it in the ballroom, right?

So you get here, and this will be one of Cori's best teams of her career, right I mean, she might lock up and reload, but this particular group is pretty stellar. I am proud of the history we've had. I certainly had a tremendous mentor, Lisa Bluder, getting us here, putting us in those positions, and obviously we got a few titles the last part of her career.

That's what I'm trying to do. Obviously I didn't do it today, but our motto is "blue collar, blue bloods," so we're trying to win those blue collar plays.

I like the makeup of our team, and I think we can keep us in that upper echelon.

Q. Can you please speak to the growth that your freshmen and sophomore have gone through over this grueling Big Ten season?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, I think they've really, really been coming along. Chit-Chat Wright, we just didn't see as good -- you did a little bit last night, but I think she's going to really turn into something pretty special. I played her too many minutes and kept running things forward. She wasn't quite as effective as a shooter as she really can be.

But she's really grown by leaps and bounds. You think about a year ago, she was coming off the bench at Georgia Tech. I think she got a couple starts. Then she's been asked to kind of lead and take us through a program that's continuing to be on the rise, but I think she's really grown by leaps and bounds.

I think Ava Heiden, it wasn't her best performance today, but it's still 7 for 11 against Betts. We didn't make it so easy with her because our guards were facing so much pressure. That's why we really couldn't get a lot going. I just couldn't get our guards freed up to be able to get some

actions for themselves other than Chit-Chat.

But I think Ava, Taylor Stremlow, she had such a stellar game last night. She's got a lot of moxie, and she's really developed and come on. Journey Houston, boy, she's been -- she's definitely undersized today. She's been undersized most of the season, but she's the big reason why we got here. Addie Deal is a freshman, I think Chit-Chat said, that came in with a lot of fanfare and height, but you still have to adapt and understand the process is the process, and I think she's done that really beautifully.

Yeah, I'm pretty excited about the future. We've got a really great kid coming in out of California as a freshman. So I am really pleased with that.

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