

# Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 8, 2026

Duluth, Georgia, USA

Gas South Arena

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Kara Lawson**

**Taina Mair**

**Riley Nelson**

Postgame Press Conference

Duke - 70, Louisville - 65

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

KARA LAWSON: It was an unbelievable game by both teams. I want to start off by crediting Louisville. What a fantastic season they have had. And they're one of the top teams in the country. They do a lot of things really well. And I know in a game like this, there's a winner and a loser and it's bitter for the loser, but those guys should hold their heads high with what they have achieved this year. I'm really excited to see what they do in the tournament because I think they're going to have a great run.

As far as my group, that game had a lot of chapters. It was long and it had its ups and downs, but we just stayed steady. I'm so proud of so many different performances, none bigger than the two young ladies sitting up here. What Mair able to do throughout the whole tournament and run our team and stay poised. And then Riley, in the face of not having her best offensive night, comes up when it matters the most. You have to have a really special quality to be able to do that. That's not something everybody can do in the moments that mean the most when you've not shot it as well as you can to come up big for us. So two big shots for her, and I can go on down the line. Delaney, monster. I mean, just an absolute monster. She willed us to win today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

**Q. Coach Walz sat up here and basically said more or less what you just said about Delaney, that she was**



**the difference-maker, won the game, especially on the offensive boards. Is that a sentiment that you share? I mean, how big were those offensive rebounds from her in particular to make sure not only that you get turnover time, but you win once you get there?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, they were huge. They were a big difference in the game because we were having a hard time scoring. They did a great job on their first-shot defense all game long. One of the things we talked about as a group coming into this game in the tournament was the rebounding was going to win the game, and we all had to be prepared, we all had to go, and Delaney has this unique ability to meet your needs. In big games, she is ready to meet whatever the team needs in that moment. That's not new to us.

I can rattle off probably, like, a ton of games in her career where she has just met our needs and come up with big play after big play. She's a winner. All these guys are winners. It's a valuable trait. That's the most valuable trait in a player is that they're a winner.

**Q. You called that timeout with a minute left, you guys are down four. What is your message to the team there, and then also you're just coming off that 10-second violation that Ashlon forced. How big was that sequence to give you guys possession again?**

KARA LAWSON: I told them to get an and one, miss the free throw, and then hit a three, and that's what happened. So they did a -- good job, guys. Good job, guys.

No, I mean, we're very just factual in late-game timeouts. Just communicating to them what the situation is. Hey, we're down four. We're going to score here. And then be prepared for them to call a timeout in advance if it's under a minute, and then it's a one-possession game and we stop there because we don't want to go too far forward. We need them to focus on scoring in that possession, and if they do call a timeout, we need them to be ready tomorrow come over and get our lineup.

If they don't call a timeout, we need them to know we're



only down two, so don't foul. It's basic, but that's the stuff that matters in a late game. You want to be able to make smart plays. So those timeouts, I don't think they were anything out of the ordinary. I think they were the usual timeouts for us in terms of scheme offensively and defensively.

**Q. How competitive this game was, how does it show how dynamic this conference is as a whole?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, we're one of the best conferences in the country. You look at the season that Louisville has put together and what they have done, it's up there with a ton of teams. I'm very confident in their ability to go deep in the NCAA tournament. This league has prepared us with pretty much everything. I mean, this game prepared us. It was pretty much everything. So we feel really prepared going into March. We're not entitled. We know we're going to have to earn it every single game, and we talk about that a lot. Like, you should have to earn it.

Like, the championship game should be hard. We should be down. Like, it should go to overtime. We should have people foul out. You expect a championship to be anything less? That's why it's so meaningful when you do it. It's so meaningful because you have to put everything on the line not knowing whether it's going to happen for you or not. That takes great courage to put everything on the line not knowing if you're going to get the result you want. So that's what these guys did. I'm really proud of 'em.

**Q. Can you take us through that five-point possession, kind of what you were seeing there from the box out to a scramble, and then, Riley, you knocked down a pretty big three there to put Duke ahead.**

TAINA MAIR: I don't even remember the play, to be honest. I just remember Riley hitting that big-time shot. She's a big-time player. I mean, let me say this. We were at half time. I told Riley, I was like, You better keep shooting the ball. Like, one's going to fall, two are going to fall, three are going to fall, and it's going to start going for her. So when she lined it up, I just knew it was money, I knew it was going in. But she can talk about that from her perspective.

RILEY NELSON: Yeah, I think I struggled shooting from beyond the line a little bit this tournament. But they had immense belief in me. T was talking to me, Coach Kara was talking to me, all of my assistant coaches, all the players, they all had belief in me. So when I lined it up, I said, you know what? I got to do this one for them and for all of them that believed in me. So it felt good when it went in, and I'm glad that solidified the win for us.

**Q. Tania, in the Louisville presser, Jeff Walz gave you your flowers. He said you are of the best guards in the country. I want to know, what do you think about that? And if you could give yourself your own flowers today, what would you tell yourself about this tournament that you've had?**

TAINA MAIR: Yeah, thank you to Jeff Walz for shouting me out. But for myself, I work hard, like, every day. I just try to be the best version of myself for everybody who surrounds me. That's the least I could give, especially being a senior, just trying to set a standard before I have to leave. That's been super important to me from the beginning of the season, even from the summer. I was, like, I got to work hard so that everybody else can see, and then the cycle will continue.

But I mean, I can't even talk about my time at Duke. It's crazy. But I'm just glad that I'm leaving my mark here, and I'm glad that my younger sisters, they know what it takes to win, so, yeah.

**Q. About Toby, she had three fouls going into the fourth quarter, played a phenomenal fourth quarter, was a really aggressive blocking shots and creating offensive rebounds. What can you speak about her performance in that fourth quarter late knowing she had foul trouble?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, all of our players have an understanding that throughout the course of the game, there's going to be rough moments. And we talked about Riley's inability to make open shots earlier in the game, but then she came through later. The same with Toby. I thought Toby struggled offensively to finish shots that she normally makes.

But you're so much more than a scorer in the game of basketball. If you want to be a champion, you better be more than a scorer. And her ability, her versatility defensively to block shots, to guard on the perimeter, we rely on her so much, and she covers up so much for us. Somebody gets beat, she saves us time and time again. No better example of that.

Yesterday's semifinal win, the ricochet goes out to Hildago. That's not her player. She contests that. Then it comes out to Moore. She runs over there, guards that, and blocks it. Like, those are winning plays as much as a layup is or as much as a three-pointer is.

So she's just got winning plays that go through her veins all game. It wasn't her best performance. She was frustrated to foul out. But we're more than one player. And I am just

so proud of how she contributed even though it wasn't her best game.

**Q. When you think about how far this team has come throughout the season, what does it mean for this group to get the job done and come out as ACC tournament champions?**

KARA LAWSON: It's very special for this group to kind of complete the journey in the ACC because everyone knows about our start. And, you know, every time I hear 3-6 for the rest of my life, I'm probably going to think about this year because I heard it so much. People just come up to you and go, 3-6.

But I'm very proud of that. I'm proud of where we started, even though it was hard, and I'm proud of where we got to. And when you look at this team, we had to figure out who we were. We didn't know that at the beginning. And we had some personnel losses as well. We lost three players for the entire season. And so this group had to figure out how were we going to play and how could we be successful, and that takes time.

And I understand that you're not given a lot of time in sport. It's okay. But we just worked, and we blocked out as much as we could. It's hard to block everything out, but we blocked out as much as we could, and we just doubled down on each other, our belief in one another, who we know ourselves to be and who I know them to be, and every day just approached it like let's just get better every day.

I love this life lesson for them. Like, for the rest of their life any time they have adversity, I hope this season serves as an example for them that they can persevere through it and that there's greater things on the other side of it.

**Q. Just to follow up on what you said about Toby, I mean, was some of what you just discussed some of what was said to her after the game where she's kind of in tears, and you're talking with her right there before the trophy presentation happened? You don't have to tell us verbatim what it was, but was there kind of that discussion of you did what we needed, even if it wasn't the best game for you? What was that discussion like?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, those were happy tears. Those weren't sad tears. So she was excited and emotional to be a two-time champion. So that was what that was about. It was me giving her the message of how proud I was of her, how important she is to our team, and how she continues to grow as a player.

I mean, listen, we hadn't won an ACC championship before Fournier was in a Duke uniform. Like, she's a special player and she's the centerpiece of what we do offensively. All the attention she gets really helps our other players play. So we all see her value and know her value and it was just me just thanking her for not just this game, but the whole tournament.

**Q. As a follow-up for both players here, knowing that Coach Lawson is there for one of your teammates like that, what has it meant this season to have Coach pour into you guys to the point where there is that belief of winning a championship at the place that are you now?**

RILEY NELSON: Yeah, Coach never gave up on us, even when we had our 3-6 start. We had a long conversation in the locker room after our UCLA loss, and she never gave up on us. We continued to work hard, we continued to stay down, and know who we are as a program, and she kept the same thing -- she wrote the same five things on the board all year, and we stayed true to that.

KARA LAWSON: Don't say what those are.

RILEY NELSON: I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. (Laughing). Same five things on the board all year. So yeah, she believes in us and we bought into that process. So, yeah, it showed on the court today.

TAINA MAIR: Just to add onto that, Coach, she does an amazing job of just pouring life in this program in every aspect, but particularly for us as players. I mean, she does everything right in the right ways. She's not just a coach to me. She's a mentor and that's how I view her. She's a role model. I hope one day I can be as great as her, you know.

But, yeah, but she just never stopped. Like, even from the summer, she poured life into us. She knew that we had big goals ahead of us, and she knew that we could meet those goals, and she's never changed up. Even when we had that loss at West Virginia, even in Vegas, and even the loss to LSU at home, she stayed true to the goals and stayed true to the message, and we all bought into that because we know that Coach is going to keep it a hundred with us, 101 at that, on good days and bad days.

So I'm just so grateful that she gets to coach me and I'm grateful that I'm under her wing.

**Q. Big-picture question for you. After not playing all of last year, could you tell us a little bit about what the road to getting mentally and physically prepared for a full season of college basketball is like and how you feel like you've grown personally from November to**

**now?**

RILEY NELSON: Yeah, I think the summer and the beginning of the season was just all about learning different scheme, just trying to get adapted to the process, and then now it was just all that hard work paying off and my teammates belief in me. I just think it was definitely a hard road, but seeing how they won last year and how they set the standard for that just to match that coming into the season this year so that we could get the second one.

**Q. How does this championship win help you create momentum going into the NCAA tournament?**

KARA LAWSON: I think all of our experiences -- not just this win, we kind of take something from all of them. Unfortunately, we don't start the first game ahead. We start at 0-0. But certainly the ups and the downs of this tournament run where different players stepped up for us, I think is valuable. So we certainly have a lot of confidence going in, but we've never been an entitled group. I think that's because of our humble beginnings. We never walk into a game thinking like, oh, this is going to be easy, or oh, we deserve to win this. We think of like, no, we got to go earn it.

And I think that approach has served us really well. So even though we feel good and we have a lot of confidence, we have to earn any win that we get in the NCAA tournament, and that starts with the first round for us.

**Q. What's the travel schedule like now?**

KARA LAWSON: Oh, well, we're just going to get on the road right after, right? So, yeah, we're excited to get back.

RILEY NELSON: Bringing it back to Durham.

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