

2022 WNBA

Commissioner's Cup

Wednesday, July 20, 2022

Chicago Sky vs. Las Vegas

Aces

Dawn Staley

Sarah Kustok

Michael Grady

Media Conference



like this when the league is looking to renegotiate a TV deal with the networks soon.

DAWN STALEY: It's disheartening that ESPN decides to just kind of shrink its program to exclude our college women's basketball National Player of the Year. I know they said they didn't invite the men's College Player of the Year, as well, because it just didn't fit into the program.

I'm not one that has to organize such an awards event. I'm not one that has to do that. I am, however, in the game, and I know there have been previous women's basketball National Players of the Year that were invited. One spoke.

I just don't know why this year Aliyah Boston was excluded from it. Whether she won or not, she should be in with all the other greats of our sport. For her to be excluded, to me, is intentional. For it to go viral on social media and then have it retract and try to get her to the show and in the show.

I just think that we're all in this together. Like women's basketball -- not just college, it's pros, it's girls' basketball. It has to be treated at a high level. They perform at a high level. We coach at a high level. We produce and put a product on the floor that is high level. We should be in high-level places.

If the ESPYs is considered one of the best awards shows, sports awards shows in the country, in the world, what have you, then it should represent all the best that our sports have to offer and not come up with excuses as to why you don't. It's lame. It's lame to me.

Should that be part of the WNBA's negotiation? I don't know if this particular instance should be. I think our game, our players are valued. They should be valued at a high level. You know, if ESPN is the place that is going to broadcast it, then they should pay at a high level.

Once you have to pay a certain amount of money, you're going to make sure it's on television. You're going to make sure that women are in places that are celebrating our sport.

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to our media. Once again, this is the conference call in advance of the 2022 WNBA Commissioner's Cup presented by Coinbase Championship Game. As you know, the game is set for Tuesday, July 26, Wintrust Arena, Chicago, 8:30 p.m. Eastern.

The game will be broadcast by Prime Video, with Michael Grady calling the play-by-play and Sarah Kustok and Dawn Staley providing color commentary. Of course, we have with us Michael, Sarah and Dawn. Thank you each for joining us. We look forward to seeing you Tuesday in Chicago.

We're going to go right to questions.

Q. Coach Staley, this is the second straight Commissioner's Cup Championship Game with a Black head coach. I know you speak a lot about Black coaches. If you could speak about the significance of that, about a league of 60 women, over 80 percent of women who are Black, that they have a coach coaching it, as well.

DAWN STALEY: I think it's great. I think when you have a diverse group of coaches and that represents what the league is, it's always a great thing. I think James (Wade) has done an incredible job with Chicago, him winning a championship last year and him being in the Commissioner's Cup this year. He is representing Black coaches extremely well.

Q. Dawn, I'm curious if you would like to take some time to comment on what happened to Aliyah Boston with the ESPYs, and also I'm curious how seriously you think the WNBA should take a broadcast decision



Q. Sarah, I'm curious if you can take me through your perspective as an analyst as to why you believe the Las Vegas Aces' defense has struggled so much as of late, especially in their loss last night to the Dream, and how that could be a deciding factor in the Commissioner's Cup.

SARAH KUSTOK: Yeah, well, one, I'm excited and thrilled about this matchup. I think we've seen both of these teams perform at such high levels throughout the course of the season. I've loved what Becky Hammon has done with the Las Vegas Aces this season, and obviously the hot start that they've got off to.

I think there's varying factors to the defensive side of things. Obviously, A'ja Wilson has been playing at an incredible level at that end. But we've seen Coach Hammon incorporate different looks, whether it's zone looks -- we see the league itself playing a lot more zone throughout the course of the season. I think a lot of that has been predicated on some of those different coverages and things she is trying to do to try to fortify the defensive end, in particular recently.

I think there's questions when you look at the Las Vegas Aces, not just with this Commissioner's Cup game but in the grand scheme of things, of their push to try to compete for a Finals title and a championship.

I think some of those questions, one, come down to depth. Obviously, that's been a question with this team. But two, on the defensive side. Sometimes, to me, that takes time. That's continuity that different players and how they play together, there's a buy-in, and I think we've seen that in flashes with this group.

They are so talented on the offensive end, and talent-wise they have it. But I think defensively is the one thing that we're going to continue to kind of watch. It's certainly not going to be easy against a Chicago Sky team that one, they're loaded; two, they're deep; and three, they are so connected. They obviously have a core that has been playing together for so long, the defending champions themselves.

But I think that's something for Becky Hammon, for this coaching staff, it has been a focus. I'm interested to talk to her, as we lead up into that game, just in terms of how she has been varying things up and how she has been trying to get this group to really, one, just buy in, and two, I think sometimes that is a work in progress when it's a new system, a new staff throughout the course of a season.

But I think they've got the players. They've got the talent. They've got a lot of veteran leadership to go along with this

group.

But I think defensively, sometimes it does come down to working on the depth, working on rotations and making sure that you understand exactly how you are committed and tied together on that end of the floor. So I think that is going to be a major emphasis and a major focus as you head into this game on Tuesday night.

Q. The last time these teams met on a really big stage was in the 2019 postseason, and it was that single elimination game that created the "Hamby heave." I'm curious through that lens of the "Hamby heave" if you could take me through how you think these two franchises but also the league itself has evolved since that moment in 2019.

MICHAEL GRADY: To that specific moment, it's tough to speak to that moment for me personally. But I want to echo some things that Sarah just touched on. It's an honor to be able to work with Dawn and Sarah and Zora (Stephenson) on this broadcast.

There are so many storylines with this game. That history that she just brought up, the last big game that they've played. But even the games that they've played during this regular season, with Vegas winning the first one in Chicago and then Chicago coming from 28 points down and winning what was the most ridiculous and unbelievable comeback that we've seen in the history of the WNBA, coming from 28 points down. It just sets the stage for this matchup on Tuesday with two teams, going back to like you said 2019 and the matchups we've seen since, going on a collision course to possibly meet again in the WNBA Finals.

So we get to see it for one game with a lot at stake, from bragging rights, for monetary reasons, for charitable reasons. You know both teams are hungry and want this game and would love to send a message ahead of any potential meeting in the postseason.

From that standpoint, I'm excited about this. It's two heavyweights going at it, slugging at each other. The number of All-Stars involved in this matchup, superstars involved in this matchup, I'm really excited about the next chapter of what looks to be a budding rivalry between Las Vegas and Chicago.

Q. Dawn, I know you've obviously been on TV a lot over the years. How much game commentary like this have you done before, and how much are you looking forward to it?

DAWN STALEY: Well, not very much (experience as an analyst). Trust me, I'm going to lean heavy on my partners

(laughing).

I mean, I don't even know why I decided to do it. I think it's just fun. I wanted to be a part of the game. I miss the game. I miss being on the sidelines. I went to the All-Star Game, and I really haven't been to any games this year because of my schedule. So I wanted to be in the gym, and what better way to do that than to be part of the crew and learn more about the WNBA and these two teams and the Commissioner's Cup and our league and the state of women's basketball. I just wanted to learn, so I'm actually using it as a professional enhancement opportunity.

Q. Everybody knows you were there at the All-Star Game. As you said, you were on the other sideline from the benches. You've worked with Kahleah Copper with USA Basketball. You've obviously watched her for a long time. What do you think it's going to be like to analyze her in this context, watching her play a game and talking about it to people on TV?

DAWN STALEY: Oh, that's easy. I mean, it's really easy. She represents North Philly well. She plays like she is from Philly. So it will be very easy to analyze that part of it, to see her go up and down the floor, to use her athleticism to make an impact on both sides of the basketball. She really is the epitome of a Philly player.

I'm going to enjoy seeing it from a different vantage point and actually being able to express myself with words rather than just actions being on the sideline.

Q. On the other side of the ball, I guess I'd ask the same question about A'ja Wilson and what it's going to be like being an analyst of her play.

DAWN STALEY: I think it's going to be great. To see A'ja blossom into who she is as just a pro player -- I talk to her a lot, so I know how much more mature she has gotten since she even left South Carolina. To hear about what she does in the offseason and then apply it and be successful, because a lot of times you can work on your game, you can try to apply it, but it doesn't always work as it does in your sessions when you're working in the offseason.

But I've seen her range increase. I just see her rebounding the basketball, pursuing the basketball a lot more.

It's going to be cool. It's going to be cool seeing the best teams have a knock-out, drag-out. I know I probably won't have the mic a whole lot, but when I do, I know I'll have a lot of incredible things to say about all the players that are really participating.

SARAH KUSTOK: I'm going to jump in and say, Coach Staley, legend of the game, Hall of Famer, icon, is going to have the mic a whole, whole lot. So we appreciate that she is excited to join us and thinks she is going to learn from us. She is going to be teaching all of us and all of those on the broadcast. We're all so fortunate and so excited to hear her basketball mind think things out.

Q. I wanted to ask Michael Grady what your process is like in terms of getting ready for a game, especially looking at a Commissioner's Cup. We already have previous matchups and how the season has gone. What is your process like?

MICHAEL GRADY: Yeah, I appreciate the question. Look, I'm a basketball fan, and I think my role in this is just that of a storyteller, and allow Dawn and Kus to shine with their expertise. But I mentioned before about the storylines within this game and just being knowledgeable about that and sharing these stories with these teams, sharing the stories about the causes both teams are representing, which will be highlighted throughout the broadcast.

Just as a basketball fan, how do your juices not get flowing when you're talking about the talent that is going to be on the floor for that Commissioner's Cup? For me, you do your normal thing, looking at numbers and background and all these different type of things. But it's really letting the personalities shine, those with me in the booth and certainly the players out there on the court, to put together a great broadcast.

I'm through-the-roof excited about the matchup, being able to be a part of this crew and telling these stories in what should be, again, an unbelievably exciting game. I'll say again, it could be a Finals preview with the talent that is on that floor.

For me, it's just really getting excited about the individual stories, the collective stories of these teams. Las Vegas, their pursuit of a championship, Becky Hammon and what she has been doing with that group. And then Chicago, trying to get it done for the second year in a row with the talent on that roster. So I'm thrilled about it, excited about it. Can't wait to share the microphone with Dawn, Kus and Z.

Q. In terms of bench production, can you speak to some of the advantages and/or disadvantages that the Las Vegas Aces may be facing?

SARAH KUSTOK: I'll jump in with that. That's the question for the Las Vegas Aces all year. I think you think about last season and their production and a lot of that predicated on the fact that you had (Kelsey) Plum and

(Dearica) Hamby, they were coming off the bench. Now those two are doing such an excellent job in producing in a starting five Las Vegas Aces group that is as talented as they come, and just how excellent they are.

I think now that Riquana Williams is back getting healthier, she is someone that is very much depended on to come in, to hit some shots, to produce off the bench. (Iliana) Rupert, just a rookie, a young player, I think she's shown different flashes. But I think a lot of it has been just trying to figure out exactly who is going to produce, how they fit in, how you spell some minutes because this starting five for the Aces has played such heavy minutes throughout the course of the season. So I do think that is a factor when you look on the other side of things with the Chicago Sky, who has probably if not one of the deepest benches in the league and how they produce and how they're able to utilize their rotation.

I know they're still waiting on (Courtney) Vandersloot and how she is potentially going to come back from the concussion, when she is available.

But overall, you look at the Chicago Sky group and they have really done such an excellent job with how they've been able to utilize Rebekah Gardner coming in, a 32-year-old rookie, and just how she's been so effective for James Wade. That's going to certainly be a factor in this game.

I know we talked about defense early on, but I think depth is always something that is so critical with a group, and one throughout the course of the regular season but in particular in games when you have that level of understanding of your roles, what is expected of you. I think that is going to be something to keep an eye on for this Commissioner's Cup game.

Q. Coach Staley, from your perspective as a player, what do you like or what is your opinion on the Commissioner's Cup? And what is your perspective on why it's so challenging to go back-to-back in this league?

DAWN STALEY: I think the Commissioner's Cup does provide just that; it makes regular-season games meaningful. You have an opportunity to win two championships. If you're really good, it affords you an opportunity to win two championships. I like the charitable component to the Commissioner's Cup.

Your second question about how difficult it is to go back-to-back, this league is just so loaded with talent. I think injuries have a huge play in it. The teams that stay the healthiest are the ones that probably are the most

successful. The games are crunched in a small period of time, and injuries are so unpredictable. It has a definite impact on who wins. It doesn't matter if you won the championship last year. The schedule is just unforgiving.

The ones that are able to stay healthy, the good teams that are able to stay healthy, give themselves a great chance of winning.

If Chicago stays healthy, they're right there in the Commissioner's Cup. They've got all the pieces. Everybody else is really trying to play catch-up.

Q. Coach, your relationship, not even just with your former players but with players throughout the WNBA, is really special. How is that going to play into your role as the color commentator?

DAWN STALEY: I'm a homer. I'm a homer. (Laughter.)

Well, I'm a homer, but I'm also -- I like great play. I don't care where it comes from. Production is production. It's nameless, it's faceless. But come Tuesday night, when it's time to talk about who is being the most productive, it will have a name, it will have a face.

If it's A'ja Wilson, it's A'ja Wilson. If it's Candace Parker, it's Candace Parker. I'm a fan of great play and production.

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