

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Postgame Press Conference



South Carolina 67, Georgia 62

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to continue with South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley. We'll take questions, please.

Q. Talk to us a little bit about you guys' mentality, just overall six of seven for you guys. How are you feeling about that?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I'm tired, honestly (smiling). This one was kind of draining because, I mean, we had to really fight. I mean, you got to fight for all of them. This was a little bit different in bringing a young team in here that was trying to find its identity to play a certain way, grittiness that you need to have to win three games in a row, then do it again against incredible competition.

But the SEC prepares you for this grueling weekend. I'm happy that we've found our way on top.

Q. How are LeLe and Zia?

DAWN STALEY: I haven't talked to LeLe or the doctors yet. Zia, she went back in the game. She says she pulled a cramp in her leg. Tough weekend. She doesn't drink enough water (smiling).

Q. You've already talked a little bit about the historical perspective of you and Coach Taylor being black women coaching, head coaching in the SEC. In light of the one-year anniversary of Breonna Taylor's death this coming Saturday, talk about the importance of what we saw today with you and Coach Taylor on the head coaches benches, what that means for black women.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, if I told you how many text messages that I got from other black coaches around the

country just congratulating us, you know, saying thank you for giving them hope that one day they can be in this position, assistant coaches as well.

I mean, I've been very fortunate to have a long career in coaching. Somebody believed in me well beyond my imagination of being a coach. He gave me an opportunity to do something that, again, I did not want to do. But the challenge of it was the thing that won me over.

I just feel like if someone like myself, of course I played the game at the highest level, but I had no coaching experience, zero, when I got into coaching. He believed enough in me to think that I could do a great job with it.

Fortunately for me, it rang true. But there are a lot of assistant coaches out there who have had as long a career as I have assistant coaching, black, white, all of them. But black women haven't got a whole lot of opportunities to be head coaches in Division I basketball. If I had to go Division II, which I don't know a whole lot about Division II or III, it will probably ring true. If not, we would hear or and more about it.

Again, I'm fortunate to be a part of the SEC, which half of the coaches were black women coaches. We look like something that was very different, or very different than the rest of the country.

So my heart is full to look down on that sideline and see Joni Taylor, someone I know, I love. We've been in the business. Her husband was one of our assistant coaches here for a long time here and at Temple. I think what you saw gives black women hope that one day they can represent in this way. It's not by any means shunning any other coaches, any other ethnicities. It's not doing any of that. It's just for a very long time coaching rosters have been filled with a lot of black assistant coaches. Some of them have paid their dues to at least get an opportunity. Not status quo, just real opportunities to learn, to grow, and to better our game, and to give the young ladies, most of the young ladies that we coach, a role model, someone that looks like them.

It's nothing against other coaches, men coaches, white



coaches, Chinese coaches. It's nothing against them. It's everything for what has been lacking in our game.

Q. You kind of talked about this being a particularly draining tournament, the grittiness needed to go through it. How challenging was this final? Seemed like it was very physically punishing.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, super challenging. If you look and you see some of our players, they're limping out of here. They were exhausted. We called timeout. You look at them, they're sitting in front of you, standing in front of you, their mouths hanging open.

But they're shaking their heads in affirmation to say, Yes, I hear you, I hear you. They did the best they could.

I know Georgia's going to feel the same way our kids are feeling tomorrow because it was a hard-fought victory for us. That's what you expect from being an SEC tournament champion.

Q. You look at the four losses you've had this year, they were all very close, competitive games that came down to the end. To come out with a win in this one, which was another hard-fought game, to do it in a championship game, how big is it for the psyche and mentality for your players going into the NCAA tournament?

DAWN STALEY: It's huge. Any time you can win this tournament, it gives you an extra boost. I'm proud of our team for being able to fight through a stretch in the season in which it was a crossroads. It could have gone either way. We could have come into this tournament, lost very easily to a very good Alabama team, limped into the NCAA tournament.

But when you beat a team like Alabama, when you beat a team like Tennessee, then you win your conference tournament championship against a team like Georgia, you got to feel good about it. You're going to need some recovery days to get back to normal, get back to your equilibrium. But it's well worth it when you're hoisting a trophy.

Q. I know each championship is something to itself, you're happy in the moment. Is this going to mean more down the road because of what you all endured to get here, what we all went through as far as the pandemic?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I mean, this is special because there were a lot of unknowns. For our team there were a lot of unknowns externally. There were a lot of scares.

Having to shut down because contact tracing or actually someone came up positive. So it was a lot of uncertainty.

But this one feels good. We earned it on the court and we earned it off the court in that none of our players was impacted very seriously, and they did everything they needed to do to put themselves in this situation.

It was a win all the way around.

Q. I want to ask you about the matchup with Jenna and Aliyah. How were you guys able to take advantage of that with getting Jenna out of the game early, especially at the end with Ali a just able to dominate late in the game?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it was a tough matchup. That's a lot of mass, mass on mass with Aliyah and Jenna Staiti. They're super competitive. They're highly skilled. They shoot threes. They can shoot the midrange. They got great footwork in the paint.

It was just who was going to gain an advantage. I thought for the time that Aliyah was out there, we really concentrated on getting her the ball. Georgia really concentrated on getting Staiti the ball. Their guards were efficient in hitting outside shots. So it put them in a position to be very balanced.

For us, we couldn't hit a whole lot of outside shots, but we hit some when they counted. We wanted to work through Aliyah Boston today because we felt like only something good could happen out of that, whether that's scoring or whether that's putting Jenna Staiti in a position where she could foul. It worked out for us today.

Q. Looks like you've added a new accessory to your wardrobe there. You said before the tournament Destanni couldn't play all 120 minutes. I think she played 109 minutes. Talk about the guts. Clearly fatigue was a factor. Talk about her knocking down big shots and then Aliyah Boston, what a tremendous day for her. Is this what your team needed, these three days, to really show them what the NCAA tournament will be like?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I'll address Henderson. The reason why that she didn't play those other 31 minutes was 31 minutes. She played all but 11? She played all but 11? Well, I mean, those 11 minutes we felt like had to be spread out between the quarterfinals and the semifinals. I just didn't feel comfortable with anybody else on the floor today because she was working so well.

I knew she was tired, but I brought her over to the side, I



was like, You got to finish it, you got to finish it. You got to suck it up, you got to finish it. We can't afford to take you off the floor. She shook her head and she made plays.

Aliyah Boston was huge today. She has to be that dominant for us in order for us to win these type of basketball games. So I was happy for her. She saw the ball go in. She didn't have double coverage night in and night out, possession in and possession out. They single covered her. We've been chomping at the bit for her to get single coverage. She made them pay for it.

Q. It's a weird situation, obviously the NCAA normally you'd be preparing to play a couple of home games, but you're going to Texas with everyone else. How do you approach the next week or so as far as practicing and getting ready for the trip down to Texas?

DAWN STALEY: Rest is equally as important as practice is. We're going to take a good portion of this week off and just let our kids heal up. It's tough. I mean, it's probably tougher this year than any other year. I think just because of the mental drain that COVID has had on our season, on our young players.

We're going to rest up. We'll probably get back going at the end of the week and see where our fate lies on Monday, next Monday.

Q. Aliyah said earlier that during the Alabama game you told the team that nice teams don't win championships, definitely not SEC championships. After this title, is this team officially not nice? How important is it to keep them in that mindset moving into the NCAA tournament?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, you just don't get rid of niceness over a weekend (smiling). Nastiness is a lifestyle really. Nice, nasty, that balance of doing it that way.

I'm just happy to see that it's in there, like it's in our players. As coaches, we have to pull that out of them or else they're just going to be comfortably in their skin. That's not the way the world works because more times than not nice people finish maybe not last place but surely not first place.

Q. Obviously not keeping a nice meter around, but Aliyah said once you told them that in the huddle, it kind of clicked for them. We kind of saw Aliyah be a little bit more aggressive when they saw the opportunity to. Just to see this team play within the situation of what you wanted them to do in the right time of the season, how proud of you of where they're headed and where they've come from?

DAWN STALEY: I'm super proud. One, the transformation had to happen because of losing. I don't know of I harped on as much as what I harped on at the end of this season. Maybe it's me. Maybe I didn't do a great job of coaching up front. But with young people, it's really hard to ask them to do things that they can't see while things are going great for them.

There are unfortunately visuals. Those visuals came in the form of losses. Then they pay attention a lot more in those situations. But they're young and they really haven't experienced a whole lot of losing on this level. They really haven't experienced kind of really play. We had senior leadership last year, but LeLe was our lone senior. It's hard for one person to take on that responsibility.

Unfortunately, again, losing does that for you. It's a wake-up call. They're highly competitive, they're highly motivated. They only want to win. So when they're not winning, they'll tune in a little bit better to make sure that that losing feeling escapes them a lot more than presents itself.

Q. You talked about finding that grit and finding that nastiness. It felt like today there were a couple of those little things you want to get cleaned up. What is at the top of your to-do list in terms of what you want to address before the first round of the NCAA tournament?

DAWN STALEY: The top of our to-do list is make layups. If we can make layups, we wouldn't have to cat and mouse the game at the end of the game. If we just made layups we'd be undefeated, to be quite honest.

That is it. We'll continue to work that in hopes we put that part of the game together for us.

THE MODERATOR: That's all the time we have today. Coach, thank you.

DAWN STALEY: Thank you all. Appreciate it.

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