

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

## South Carolina Gamecocks

## Coach Dawn Staley

## Zia Cooke

### Postgame Press Conference



South Carolina 74, Tennessee 58

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley and student athlete Zia Cooke.

**Q. Zia, you had a fantastic game. Talk about your performance?**

ZIA COOKE: I just tried to remain focused. I think in the beginning it was hard for me to get shots, but as I continued to get play things started to open up, so it was pretty good.

**Q. Zia, how much does this mean, especially after last year falling short to come back your senior year and win another tournament title?**

ZIA COOKE: It means a lot, but the mentality we have right now is to win. It's all over the floor. That's what we want to do. So it definitely means a lot, but we're not done yet.

**Q. I think you were up by 12 at one point in the first half, they hung tough and cut it to 6 by halftime, and then in the second half you guys ran past them. What was the mindset to take control of the game?**

ZIA COOKE: Just to continue to push. Coach let us know they weren't a team that was going to back down so we knew they were going to play hard the entire game.

But we just had to make sure we played harder and did the little things to get us to the win.

**Q. Zia, it didn't seem like there was a huge celebration after it was over. I know you guys went through it; is**

**that because you have bigger goals ahead?**

ZIA COOKE: It's definitely because we have bigger goals ahead, but also we're just not that type of team. We celebrate our wins with each other, but we don't do too much celebrating.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Zia. You can be head back to the locker room.

Questions for Coach?

**Q. I'm not going to ask about injuries, but does this ever get old, Dawn?**

COACH STALEY: Nope. Winning championships, it never gets old because you have to -- we often have to remind ourselves where we come from. We used to come to this tournament and were out in one day; then the season was over.

So it was just working towards getting to this place, and once we're here, we're going to enjoy it. Because there were a lot of times in which the season ended prematurely and on a sour note on those days in which -- 12 to 15 years ago when we weren't competing for championships.

Those weren't fun times, but they were times which humbled you and allowed you to figure things out so you could have days like this to enjoy.

**Q. Like I asked Zia, Tennessee, they weren't going away. They were 6 points at halftime. What changed in the third quarter?**

COACH STALEY: I mean, we wanted to win. We really did want to win. I thought we just bared down and started playing like we normally play, putting possessions together where we're scoring, getting stops.

And Tennessee would not go away. They would not. They actually gave multiple efforts on the rebounding side of the ball, and then they had players that put us back on our heels.



I mean, it was a hard matchup with Horston and Jackson. You need to either guard them one-on-one, with some help coming from somewhere, and then allow them to rebound the basketball a lot better.

I think over the course of forty minutes and the amount of people that we were able to throw at them, they weren't as sharp as they were throughout the entire game. That's just a product of our depth.

**Q. You didn't go with that depth as much as you usually do tonight. You let the seniors and the experienced players out there. Is it because you saw it was that kind of game where you needed their smart decision making?**

COACH STALEY: I mean, I actually know this is probably this team's as a whole last time here, and I wanted our seniors to kinda play it out, give them a little extra minutes.

I mean, Raven starting shortened our bench because she is one of the first people off the bench. So we probably played one less person.

Bree, I wish I had an opportunity to play her a little bit more, but I wanted to send our seniors off the way that they wanted to go off, with them in control of it. But Breezy will get her chance to be that one in the very near future.

**Q. Coach, Zia Cooke had three steals at midcourt. It looked as if she was a step quicker than Tennessee's guards. Did you count on that coming in or were you surprised?**

COACH STALEY: Zia wants to win more than anything. She finds her way impacting the game on both sides of the basketball. So I really didn't anticipate her getting as many steals as she got, but when she had that fire in her eyes she was going to make something happen.

So she digged in a couple times, and I was happy for her, because she needed to get some easy buckets under her belt. She needed to see that ball go in, and then once it went in she was able to knock down some 3's. It helps her have a quicker step defensively knowing she is impacting the game in that way.

**Q. Dawn, what's the next week or so look like? It might be two weeks before you play another game.**

COACH STALEY: Right. We're off for Monday-Thursday, spring break for us. I got to go recruiting on the west coast on Tuesday, so there is my break.

**Q. With Kierra, how did that go last night? Do you feel**

**like she'll play in the NCAA tournament?**

COACH STALEY: Yeah, yeah. Kierra will not have a spring break. She'll be back at the ranch getting her ankle right. She was moving on it today and it was -- could we have pushed it? Probably, but, you know, we felt like Raven could step in and some of our other experienced guards could fill the void until she is able to get back.

But I don't think we win a national championship without her being able to play, you know, as healthy as she can be.

**Q. Dawn, seems we always ask you this, the fans who came up. It's a big number that they had here; I know Tennessee had some fans. What does this say about the group that follows you? What does it say in three weeks when maybe they are all back here for the same thing?**

COACH STALEY: It's amazing! It's amazing. I know that playing here in Greenville is advantageous for us, but we draw a big crowd. They come in droves and they continue to come as the weekend gets closer to Sunday.

And then to hear them today, like during the introductions I took my time to really just be in that moment, to hear it, you know? It's quite incredible, when we went on our run, to hear it. It felt like home. It felt like Colonial Life Arena, and I'm so happy for not only our players and our program, but our fans.

They have been ride or die throughout. Every loss they coach us up, every win they probably wanted to make some adjustments, but they're super proud of their team and the product that we put on the floor, and it really helps.

It really helps us -- it helps us in recruiting, it helps us just know that we got that -- you know, that 12th player that impacts the game.

And also it helps that we win some of those social media battles.

**Q. (Away from mic.)**

COACH STALEY: No, no, I haven't. When there were close games they got some comments, which, you know, I embrace 'em. They're educated comments, so they're not like ignorant comments. They're like, maybe we should have done that, because they know our team so well and they know other teams so well.

They're just really -- they're into women's basketball, and we're fortunate to have them as part of our fan base.



**Q. Dawn, Aliyah, Zia, and Bree all had big games today. What does that say about their status in that class in they're 12-2 with tournament titles in this building?**

COACH STALEY: I could not be more happier for that class. There's a standard we had prior to them coming and it was a high standard. But when that class came on campus, they took our standard to another level. Like, there are classes that drop your standard, but this class, I haven't met very many, haven't interacted with very many classes that take you to another level as far as class, culture, winning, sacrifice, and really, really mean sacrificing.

I know LA did not -- wasn't part of the All-Tournament team, but here is how they work: Aliyah just gave her her All-tournament trophy because she deserved it. She deserved it, and that's the type of people we have in our program that understand how it works.

They only want the best for each other. I'm super happy that she is able to share some of her hardware with LA.

**Q. I was hoping you could speak to Kierra Fletcher. Coming into this season maybe not having as much on the point guard standpoint and what she has meant to this team. Someone told me just now that y'all dedicated this game to her.**

COACH STALEY: Obviously when Kierra tried to get back out there, she got treatment all night and tried to test it out. She was moving pretty good, but then overall what would that do to her long-term, and actually short-term and having a NCAA tournament start in two weeks we chose to keep her out.

I just told her we have enough in the room. They're not going to allow this opportunity to slip away. They're going to win it for you, so rest assured. I know that you can't play, but you keep the bigger picture in mind. If we're so fortunate enough to come back here to win our first and second round and come back here, you will get an opportunity to do it on the biggest stage.

**Q. Coach, with the history of women's basketball as context, any special significance that this SEC Championship came over Tennessee, that these players got to knock them off?**

COACH STALEY: No, but, I mean, you look at the storied program of Tennessee and you see what they have done in our conference. They reigned supreme in this conference, and still no matter -- they're going to probably reign supreme when I'm long gone as far as coaching,

because I think I saw a graphic where they have 17 appearances. 17 titles, not even appearances, like, titles.

We won't reach that unless it's somebody else that comes in after me and tear it up. But we won our first against Tennessee. We won our regular season first against Tennessee years ago someone in our media told me. Then for us to win it here at the SEC Tournament, I think it's full circle, but we certainly want to still pay homage to Coach Summitt and the way that she -- she is a light for all of us, the 13, 12 other teams, 13, including Tennessee, and creating a standard in our conference.

So we're never going to lose sight of that. We're going to enjoy our success with our team, but I'm always going to keep in mind what they've meant to our conference, and it's the standard.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everyone. Thank you, Coach.

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