

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 8, 2024

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks Coach Dawn Staley

Tessa Johnson

Ashlyn Watkins

Postgame Press Conference



South Carolina 79, Texas A&M 68

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach Dawn Staley and student-athletes Tessa Johnson and Ashlyn Watkins.

Q. Tessa, your first post-season experience in college. Obviously you got off to a great start. Your mindset coming in?

TESSA JOHNSON: My mindset, it was like there's three quarters in the season, and I know I had to look in this quarter. Like they were talking about the difference between regular season and then post-season. I could feel the difference on the court.

But my mindset is just lock in, trust my team, trust the process and trust my coaches.

Q. Tessa, you got your first collegiate block today. How big a play was that?

TESSA JOHNSON: I was trying to be like Ashlyn Watkins (smiling).

ASHLYN WATKINS: She okay (laughter).

Q. Ashlyn, what did they do early to kind of frustrate you guys, and how did you get past it and get to the point where you were able to get in your rhythm?

ASHLYN WATKINS: I don't think it was necessarily them frustrating us. I feel like it was on us. But we just came back. We knew what we had to do. We knew we had to

win this game. We just came at it like we wanted to win really.

Q. Tessa, you had that stretch in the second quarter where you helped the team push the lead out. Were you just ready for that moment?

TESSA JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, I was just playing the game. My teammates did what they had to do. The ball found me. I just shot it.

Q. Tessa, 10 turnovers in that first quarter. You were able to cut out the turnovers in the last three quarters. What did you do on offense to clean things up, convert on those possessions?

TESSA JOHNSON: We were trying to go back to how we played in regular season. I mean, we were just playing basketball. It wasn't the greatest basketball, but we were finding our teammates. I know they were guarding, denying the wings, but we had to adjust to it.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, you can be dismissed back to the locker room. We'll continue with questions for head coach.

Q. I'll go off Tessa just said. Was it not the greatest basketball out there that you saw?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's post-season play. Texas A&M were really playing to increase their chances of getting into the NCAA tournament. I think they did that.

I mean, with us, it's our first tournament game with this team. You don't know how they're going to respond to it. I don't think they met the moment, especially in the first quarter. I mean, slowly we started playing the way we needed to play, and then Texas A&M started to just force us to do things we didn't want to do.

Yes, they had a lot to do with it, but we also had a lot to do with self-inflicted wounds. Hopefully we knocked the rust off, we can get back to some better basketball.

Q. You mentioned not knowing how some of the



young players would respond. Were you surprised Tessa came in as poised and confident as she did?

DAWN STALEY: No. Tessa is solid. She's very predictable. She can score the ball. She scored a lot of points in high school. Sometimes you don't think that transfers over. With her, it does. I mean, she's a floor spacer. She can get to the rim. She has a nice pullup. It's scoring on three levels.

She does a good job of keeping the defense off balance because they really don't know what she's doing. Her head is up. She looks like she's going to pass it a lot. She finds a way to stop on a dime, the pullup.

She's been playing well. It's not how she's playing, it's just the amount of older players in front of her that also play well. It decreases her playing time.

Now that we're in post-season, some of the novelty of our starting lineup will wear off. But the novelty of her, being able to give us the kind of minutes that she gave us today, I mean, she's primed to have a good post-season.

Q. I think you assisted on 15 of your first 19 baskets as a team. The turnovers are one thing to look at. The ball seemed to be moving pretty well on the offensive side. What did you like on that on that end?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, that was one of the keys, to move the ball. I mean, granted, we did assist on 20 of our 29 baskets. We just couldn't get enough of that because of the turnovers got in the way.

But I like that about our team. That is something that we've been working on and we made our team aware of throughout the season. I was happy for them. I did tell them that at the end of the game.

But, I mean, the 24 turnovers are a killer. I mean, it didn't shoot us in the foot as bad as it could, but I will say if we play like this in the semifinals, that will be our last game here in Greenville.

Q. This is such a unique format, quick turnaround. Is there a lot or anything you can do, or do you just have to have them rely on what they've done most of the regular season?

DAWN STALEY: There's not much time. We'll have a shoot-around tomorrow. Try to get the work we need to get in. Nothing is going to be live. We do have to rely on the habits that we form, not the post-season habits, but the regular season habits. Hopefully we can get back on the good side of basketball, the good side of good basketball.

Q. Is it easier to I guess emphasize taking care of the basketball when you do turn it over like you did, but you came out with a win? Is it easier to get the ladies to lock back in?

DAWN STALEY: This whole season has been learning lessons through winning. I mean, yes, we won a lot of basketball games, but there were a lot of things that we need to work on, a lot of deficiencies that we need to work on. And this team has responded time in and time out.

They're going to have to respond now that it's win-or-go-home situation. I look forward to them and this dynamic of this basketball team as we live to see another day. Hopefully we can play better. Got to play better in order for us to win.

Q. What did you think of Tessa's block?

DAWN STALEY: What block? I missed it (smiling).

No, no. It was a good block. Tessa is a big guard. I would say she probably lacked confidence in defense before she got here, especially when we started practicing. The emphasis that we put on it, she lacked confidence in it.

The more and more she plays, the more and more she sees herself doing some great things out there on that side of the basketball, the more confidence she's gaining and the more times she's putting herself into position. Not only get a block, but she gets deflections, she's in great defensive position. I'm just happy for her.

I'd rather take all the other stuff in and around the blocked shot because that's going to be probably 95% of who she'll be on the defensive side of the ball.

Q. You talked yesterday about the tournament being here in Greenville. As someone who advocates so strongly for this game continuing to grow, every time you come to Greenville and see this tournament grow, how rewarding that is for you?

DAWN STALEY: It's great. I mean, the people in this building are super kind and hospitable. I do think this is an attractive city for fans, fans. I think it's advantageous to us because we just right up the street. There's no doubt about that.

We draw out a large crowd. I've been in buildings in which there's not a whole lot on the first day or the second day. I mean, the quarterfinals were great today. I think they're going to be great throughout the entire day. I think the semifinals are going to be more than today. The finals will

be more than tomorrow.

I think it's great. Our tournament is growing from an attendance standpoint. I think I saw the curtains up yesterday. Curtains were gone today. I think that's the growth. You could see that just in that instance.

Then now that we're in the semifinals, you'll see even more people fill the arena for us and against us. I think that's a great appearance for our game and our tournament.

Q. A question on freshmen. There are a whole bunch of amazing freshmen in this game right now. Joni thought it was because there are more eyes on the game. You have a couple of 'em, too. People talk about Milaysia, but it seems like Tessa, she has a really strong basketball IQ. Freshmen usually aren't that way.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we got the best of both worlds. You got an exciting player like Milaysia who just continually gets better on both sides of the basketball. Then you have Tessa, who probably hasn't got as much of an opportunity to play consistently. She did have a couple of injuries that slowed her progress down a little bit. Now that she's a lot more healthy, I mean, I feel very, very confident in both of 'em. Both of 'em played a lot of minutes for us. It's going to be helpful for them to play for us.

Pao played a lot of minutes today. Raven played a lot of minutes today. Anytime we can get them on the floor and they're doing well and building confidence, it's only going to strengthen our team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

DAWN STALEY: Thank you.

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