

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

**South Carolina Gamecocks**

**Coach Dawn Staley**

**Milaysia Fulwiley**

**Te-Hina Paopao**

Postgame Press Conference



DAWN STALEY: I'll answer that.

I mean, what you saw were two teams, highly competitive teams, trying to win a conference championship. They did not handle it well. Our players didn't. Their players didn't. It escalated.

I want to thank the officials and everybody that jumped in, just kind of calmed the situation down. Then the penalties were what they were. They were well within the rules of ejecting the players that left the bench, even if they just stepped over the line of the bench. You can't. You have to sit there and keep your composure.

But I'm going to say this. Flau'jae came to me after the game, right after the game, she just apologized and said she's not that type of player. I really appreciate that. That's something that somebody won't ever hear if I didn't say anything. And she's not. She's a really good person. Things just got escalated.

I'll take responsibility for what happened from our side of it, which is we talk about these things as a team, and we try as much as possible to express to them how not to react in those type of situations.

Real time is real time. I know that anybody, Kamilla, as well as the other four or five players that were ejected, I know if they had a chance to do it all over again, they would do it differently. But now we have that.

I just don't want the people who are tuning in to women's basketball to see that and think that is our game, because it isn't. Our game is a really beautiful thing. To be quite honest, this is a part of it now. So we have to fix it, and we have to move on.

**Q. On a positive note, you two were newcomers this year. How does it feel to have your SEC regular-season championship and your SEC tournament championship rings?**

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It hasn't sunk in just yet, today's game. Just being able to be called champions is just a

South Carolina 79, LSU 72

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the press conference for the SEC tournament champion South Carolina.

We'll begin with questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. MiLaysia, obviously local product, you've wanted to be in a moment like this for South Carolina ever since you were a kid. How special was this moment for you?**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: It meant a lot to me considering the fact I'm only a freshman. It was my first time around. This is a great first experience for me and my team, and the other freshmen, Tessa Johnson and newcomer Paopao.

I'm just blessed to be here and excited.

**Q. Hectic moment in the end. How do you maintain your composure and what is your conversation like in the huddle?**

TE-HINA PAOPAO: The main point was we got to finish it out on these last two minutes, be composed. It's a mental thing. We got to stick together. At the end of the game, we just got to be there for each other and finish with high heads, high heads up.

**Q. MiLaysia, you were right in the middle of that. Can you take us through what happened there, what you saw.**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I'm not sure.



great feeling. It's a great blessing. It's a great opportunity to keep the journey going. Just really blessed to be here and very grateful for our team, the program, just everyone that's been supporting us and has been loving on us.

**Q. MiLaysia, do you see one of your important roles for this team is when things are going stagnant, a lack of energy, to come in and provide that energy and that burst?**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: My role on this team is just go out there and be who I am. When I go on the court, I feel like I do whatever's asked from my coach.

**Q. You have signed a lot of autographs, a lot of selfies on the court throughout this season. To do it here and see the fans stick around. MiLaysia, you stopped at every single person on the sideline. What were the fans telling you in this moment?**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: They were just telling us how far they traveled to see this game, how much they appreciated us, how much they're happy for us.

I'm just appreciative to have great fans like we do. They stick with us through thick and thin. I just feel great to be in a predicament with a team like this. It's a blessing.

**Q. MiLaysia, after the quarterfinal, you said that you were really nervous. You said tomorrow is not going to be that way. Obviously you had a great semifinal, even better championship. Describe your mentality going into these last two games.**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I feel like basketball is a confidence, that's the key to basketball. I feel like my confidence is out the roof when I step on the court. Nobody can guard me, check me.

It's really a mind thing. I just told myself that I have to lock in and play better.

**Q. Pao, this team was on the biggest stage, you faced adversity in each game. Describe how closer this experience has brought this group.**

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, no, this is a first experience for everyone. As I said before, the emotions hasn't sunk in yet. I don't know when that's going to sink in.

It definitely brought us closer together. They're family. I love them so much. We just love each other very, very much. We're so genuine with each other. We trust each other, we support each other in every aspect.

It's going to help us in the long run because we felt what it felt like yesterday in the close game.

This feeling, I think everyone wants to feel this feeling again. We have to get back in the lab, get back to work, just keep doing what we're doing.

**Q. Te-Hina, MiLaysia was saying she was going to be better the next two games. The way they impacted the games, what do you think of her poise, confidence?**

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Man, that's how she is. She's a superstar. She a hooper. She a baller. She's always going to come game ready. I'm super proud of her performance today. She stepped up really big for us, I'm just really proud of her.

She trusted the process. She's still trusting it. She's going to ride her journey. I'm proud how composed she was today. Her confidence was out the roof, like they say.

When you have a player like Lay, you have to let her go, be who she is, let her ride the wave.

I'm super proud. Can't say much (smiling).

**Q. What was the celebration like at the end of the game when you're missing half your team?**

DAWN STALEY: Good question (smiling).

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It was heartbreaking. We couldn't have done it without them. We're a team for a reason. We're a family. It was really hard for us. Just a lot of emotions. We really wanted them to celebrate with us.

We went back in the locker room, we did our little celebrations together. It was really heartbreaking. But we're a team. We're going to bounce back from that and learn from our mistakes.

**Q. Te-Hina, this was another game where they came back at you. What did you do to dig in and get this victory?**

TE-HINA PAOPAO: We just told each other we got to lock in and just get a stop. Once you get a stop, you got to get a bucket. We got to keep doing that.

Basketball is a game of runs. They had their little running run, then we had our run. We ended upped on top. We just got to keep being who we are.

**Q. MiLaysia, 10 points in the third quarter. I don't think you missed a shot. At what point do you realize**



**that you're kind of in the zone and you can take over a game like that?**

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I really just be out there hooping really. Honestly, I just be hooping. I feel like my team, they do a great job with giving me the ball when I'm open, getting me open. I'm thankful and blessed to have great teammates like I do.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you for your time. Congratulations.

We'll now take questions for Coach Staley.

**Q. Some high highs and some low lows for Kamilla this weekend. Did you get a chance to talk with her?**

DAWN STALEY: I haven't. I haven't been to the locker room yet.

But, I mean, Kamilla understands. She really understands. I think if you talk to Kamilla about things, she probably says she let her emotions get the best of her and she's got to handle them better. She's got to be better. She's that important to our team, that important to the state of women's basketball.

Kamilla is a star. We just really can't have her in a position where she's in the locker room for anything other than halftime and the end of the basketball games.

**Q. Obviously we've talked about MiLaysia multiple points during this season. What's it like for you to see her out there and be hooping as she's saying?**

DAWN STALEY: Her maturation process has been great. She's a learner. She says she's out there hooping. She's out there hooping and learning, grasps what it takes to play at a high level all the time, like all the time. She had it going on today. She was able to score. She was able to find teammates.

I think just her presence, her speed, her ability to create her own shot was needed today, like no other.

**Q. Today's game was a game between the past two national champions. There's still a lot of games to be played in March Madness. Do you feel like this is the best two teams in the country, and you could meet again in the Final Four, championship game?**

DAWN STALEY: I don't know if we're the best team in the country. I know there's a ranking that says we're No. 1. But I think that's subjective. LSU is really good. Like, for them to be where they are, having lost a couple of players

along the way, still stand where they stand.

While I'm at it, I really hope that Last-Tear is okay. I know she was back at the hotel. I hope she gets healthy quickly because she makes them better.

To have who they have, Angel playing the way she plays, Aneesah playing the way she's playing, I think Flau'jae has much improved. If there was a most improved, I would certainly give Flau'jae my vote, her ability to play on both sides of the basketball.

Mikaylah Williams is our Rookie of the Year in this league, can take over basketball games. Hailey Van Lith is playing her best basketball for LSU right now.

I do think they have the experience and the talent to be considered one of the best teams in the country.

**Q. You've experienced this winning feeling so often. Can you take us through what you're feeling just today after this win?**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, it's bittersweet, it really is. I want to be there for the players that were able to end the game and celebrate with them. But part of me was wanting to be in the locker room to celebrate with the players who weren't able to do that.

But we put ourselves in that position. We made decisions that forced our hand to be in that situation. So I'm hoping that it's the last of the last. Hope it's the biggest lesson that any of our teams have to experience.

**Q. Today, to be able to connect with the fans after a moment like this, was it uplifting at all, to know they're there and what they mean, especially the apology you made on the court?**

DAWN STALEY: I'm always going to find time for our fans. Always, always. They've created something truly special at South Carolina. For them to come, for them to travel, for them to come to our home games, anywhere we are, there's always somebody in the stands cheering us on and welcoming us to town.

There's always going to be a special place in my heart for our fans. I will always take a picture. I will always sign an autograph. I might not be able to do all of them, but a lot of them I'm going to do. For time's sake, I'll get in as many as I can.

**Q. You have some time now before your next game. What's going to be the plan to get this team ready for the NCAA tournament, especially players going**

## through this for the first time?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, rest, rest, a lot of rest. We'll probably take the next three or four days off from practice. Spring break usually lands on this week, but it was on the next week. It actually was this week. They'll have their days off from practice, but not from class, some of the stuff they'll have to do with our athletic trainer and our performance coach.

No practice, though.

**Q. After everything had happened, your team looked comfortable for the last two minutes. What did you tell them before everyone went back on the court to refocus them?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we had a lot of time to just kind of de-escalate. Before we knew exactly what was going to happen. I knew Kamilla was gone. Knew she was going to be disqualified. I did not know we were going to have like four other players disqualified 'cause I was unaware that they left the bench.

So we just talked about strategy, like what we wanted to do, what kind of ball screen coverage that we wanted to have, what type of offenses we wanted to run, to milk the clock a little bit.

LSU, they found themselves back into the basketball game. So we had to fight and claw to finish it. I thought we did a great job making free throws at the end of the game, Breesy hitting a couple of big shots to give us a lead in which we didn't have to panic.

**Q. You said multiple times how young this team is. What does it say that this young core can show up in the big spots? How critical was it for the experience they got here for the run that's fast approaching?**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I'm super proud of our youngsters. Their experience is a little bit different than when some of our experienced players were youngsters. They have to play for us.

If you asked them if they saw themselves playing how they're playing today like three or four months ago, before the season, I'm sure they would say no.

Their heads were spinning about the pace of play, about how we implement offenses and defenses, just the pace of what we need to learn. It took 'em a while to actually acclimate to that. They put in a lot of work to get to where they are. Like, it just doesn't happen overnight.

I'm sure they would want it to happen overnight, but it just doesn't. As much as we saw them perform the way they have in this tournament, there's been times where they didn't perform. There will probably be more times they don't perform up to that level.

It's just learning how to maintain that high level of play. Only experience will teach them that.

**Q. It's the second straight game in a row that it's coming down to the final few minutes. Fighting off a massive comeback yesterday, a smaller one today. What did you learn from your team in the last 48 hours about how they fight off teams and close out games?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, they're pretty poised. They feel like their competitiveness goes to another level when a game gets close. They don't panic.

I think a lot of it is just how close they are. They don't want to let each other down. They don't. They hold each other accountable. Like this is probably the team that holds each other more accountable than any team that I've been around. Maybe that's the trick.

Some of the things we're addressing in a timeout, they've already addressed on the court. They're already talking about what happened out there on the way back to the bench.

It's pretty cool to see the closeness of this group and this group really just getting each other. They also will definitely encourage. They surely would have multiple conversations about something they did that deserves a highlight or a pat on the back. They do that a lot, as well.

**Q. I know you talked about their poise, but specifically today, only six players to finish the game. What do you think it said about your team that the players that were finishing the game did it, even though it was tight, they overcame everything that happened and a super long break?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, they are free. Like they play without pressure. It's the most amazing thing. Even I put pressure on them. I put pressure on them probably at some point in each game, they look at me. And the other ones that I'm talking to -- aren't talking directly to, they're encouraging them. They are holding them accountable.

They're resilient. I'm happy for them. I also know that you can't keep winning the close games. At some point the law of averages say... You got to build the lead, and you got to keep the lead, if you can get one.

**Q. You mentioned the uniqueness and accountability of this group. Was there a time that you realized this group had something specific like that that the other ones haven't?**

DAWN STALEY: No, because I learn each day there is something that makes me... They don't even know it's happening. I'm just listening. It's conversations that they have in the locker room 'cause they're loud. If I watch 'em in practice, they're whispering to each other about what's happening out there on the floor. That's what I think they're talking about.

It's just really cool to see. It's genuine. Like, it's genuine. Like, you can have some teams in which they have cliques and they get along with this clique, it can lead to some dissension. This team, they do have cliques, but they integrate. It's the most beautiful, amazing thing that this team has. The chemistry that they have, they've created from the very beginning until now, has been really refreshing to be around.

**Q. You have to have some conflicting emotions about the way this unfolded. Like a parent, you may not be happy with what one of your children did, but if they're standing up for their siblings, part of you was proud of that, too. They showed they stood up for one another no matter the situation. That has to be something to balance there.**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, there is. A lot of people ask me to compare last year's team to this year's team. That would have never happened with last year's team (smiling). They would have been so political about it. If that would have happened, Aliyah would probably have been the referee, No, don't do that.

Then you got this team, they're protectors. So, yeah, it's bittersweet. You want them to protect their sisters. At the same time, you want them to do it in a way in which you don't get penalized, you're not in a position to not be able to celebrate, which is something that's super hard to do, like super hard to do, to win a SEC tournament championship.

We'll talk about it. But I know they will draw strength from it. They'll get closer.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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