

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Tuesday, October 18, 2022

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## South Carolina Gamecocks

### Dawn Staley

#### Women's Media Day Press Conference

**Q. As you kind of sit about a month out from the season, how will you evaluate that point guard position and what's that competition look like with Zia and a couple other people?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we've got various experience. Zia has been doing some heavy-duty playing the point. Raven Johnson is coming back, and she's coming back fairly nicely.

Then we've got to get Kierra Fletcher into the fold. She hasn't really practiced consistently. She's got a couple of nagging injuries. But once we get her back to full tilt, then it could be a pretty -- I can evaluate a little bit better.

But we have to go with the healthy bodies that we have, and Zia is doing a great job. Raven, when she's in -- she practices the entire time. It's just she doesn't get the reps, like every rep, she doesn't do every rep. She probably does about 75 to 85 percent of practice. But we've got to take her out because we don't want to -- we want to lighten her load before we're able to play her full time.

**Q. You mentioned a couple weeks back that there was a year where you felt the journey got stale throughout the year, but you also mentioned that you feel like this team has kind of created a championship behavior. How have you seen that evolve over time, and do you worry about the journey getting stale for this group at all?**

DAWN STALEY: I do. It's a big worry. Because once you've won and you return basically almost your entire team, you tend to want to take the beginning part of it, the journey, the meat and potatoes of the season lightly.

They haven't shown signs of it, but we haven't really been healthy-healthy, either. We've had our most successful seasons when we've been healthy.



So we have to get healthy. So the challenge in front of us is getting healthy right now, and then we can evaluate a little bit better.

But certainly it's on my mind and in my heart to keep this team engaged and challenged every day that we're out there practicing.

**Q. In the past couple weeks, what do you feel like the differences are from the beginning of this season from the beginning of last season? Obviously there's a championship in mind, but when you go into the season, where do you feel like it differs from the last?**

DAWN STALEY: One is just we've always been very healthy. We were able to just play how we're going to play. We can establish rotations. We can establish a starting five. We can't do that as of yet because we're not completely healthy.

I just think that with this particular team, I don't want to -- like I'm a feeler. I feel certain things. They may not necessarily be doing this, but I feel like I have to challenge them a lot. But I also feel like we're not healthy enough for me to challenge them because we don't have our full roster at full strength.

But they're focused. They come in and they work extremely hard. But it's hard to gauge where we are because we don't have a full-time point guard. Zia plays it, but the strength of what she does has been always on that 2 guard slot.

**Q. When you have some challenges as a coach, who are some of the people you might reach out to for advice? And then you're speaking about another championship, have you spoken to anyone in another sport who's faced that same dilemma?**

DAWN STALEY: I haven't. I think what we do -- we have a wealth of experience on our staff, and we talk about everything. Like we have knockout drag-outs as to where we think our team is. We do it within.

Nobody knows our team better than the people that are around us every single day. Our staff is pretty darned



good for a reason, and they get paid a lot of money, so they're going to have to give up some information, what they're seeing, what they're feeling, and we have healthy discussions.

**Q. You mentioned trying to figure out a rotation a little bit. It seems like you're pretty littered at that forward spot. Where do you feel like that is right now, and how do you go about defining that rotation?**

DAWN STALEY: It's hard. I mean, it's hard. We've been playing Victaria Saxton at the 3 a lot in practice because we don't have as many guards as we usually have, so she's filling in nicely there.

And then our front court, it's a lot. We have more post players than we do guards.

But the great thing about it is everybody is better. Like Kamilla is a totally different player than she was last year. Sania Feagin, totally different than she was last year.

Then you add Ashlyn to the mix, Watkins, I've never had a freshman that has come in as physically prepared for the rigors of a college basketball season like she is.

The good thing about it is we can play a very versatile lineup because of our experience. BB can slide over to the 3 easily because she knows it, she's been around it, she's a pretty good defender, she's smart, she communicates.

Same with LA. LA can play 1 through 5 for us. We've had her playing that, so it's nothing new.

Is it a more traditional lineup like we've had? No. But sometimes you've got to piece it together until you get completely healthy.

**Q. The SEC has only gotten more competitive in the last year. Talk about, even though being at the top of that, how does that feel, and knowing that for strategy and inter-conference play?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it feels like we've got the target on our back, and it feels like people, our league is a lot better. Coaches are great. We get transfers coming from other conferences to our conference that strengthen our conference.

This league prepares you to win National Championships, so people have gotten better, so it's not going to catch anybody off guard. We're not going to catch anybody off guard, and the teams that have gotten better, they're not going to catch anybody off guard. We know that every time we step on the floor, any of us, any of us can lose to

any of us.

It just feels like the norm in SEC play.

**Q. You talk about the idea of not wanting this particular team and the players to get stale. I wanted to know, just based off the first few weeks, what have you seen from players like Kamilla and Sania and Aliyah just this far?**

DAWN STALEY: I see everybody has gotten better, like noticeably better. They feel better. They are more confident. They are creating -- they're creating problems for us as coaches because we've got to play them. We've asked them to improve, we've asked them to come back in better shape with more mental strength, with more physical strength, and they've done that.

Now it's on us to figure out what combinations that we can play to play all of them. I mean, we are incredibly heavy in the front court with players that can play a lot of different positions.

I mean, we're a month out. We're going to have to figure it out. But it's hard, and that's a good thing.

**Q. Whether it's on the court or off the court, what's something that has surprised you about your two true freshmen, Talaysia and Ashlyn?**

DAWN STALEY: I just mentioned about Ashlyn. Like Ashlyn is an incredible athlete. Like she's super smart. Like she doesn't move like a freshman. She could probably communicate a little bit more, but that will come. You can push her. She's very, very coachable, just highly intelligent, and she's got a really good feel for the game.

Like I just think the sky is the limit for her. Like every day she does something, and you're like -- you know, it's not like Aliyah Boston leaving. The cupboards won't be bare because of our contributions that we're getting from some of our younger post players.

And then Talaysia Cooper, Talaysia is just in a different position. Like sometimes we're playing her at the point, and that's hard as a freshman. Sometimes the wing. We're giving her a lot of responsibility, and sometimes it's too much for her. So sometimes we've got to slow her down and just put her at one position for her to get really good at that and confident. Because she's up, she's down. It's hard. It's hard.

But we need her to give us something. But she's super talented. She can create her own shot. She's got great court vision. She just has to know when and where to

apply those things.

**Q. With last year's win as well as also just the fan growth exploding, does it feel like South Carolina is knocking on a dynasty?**

DAWN STALEY: I don't know. I don't even know what a dynasty is except what UConn has done, to win as many National Championships. To be a dynasty, I do think you've got to have a little back-to-back championship in you. I do think you have to have sustained success in your conference, in the type of conference that we have.

So I don't know. I think we are -- our program is in a good place where we're able to attract some of the best talent in the country, and it starts there. Like it starts with really good players that are unafraid to come to a place and have to compete night in and night out and get better.

When it comes to attracting the best, it's dynasty-like. It's dynasty-like. I don't think we can deem ourselves that just yet.

**Q. You mentioned having to challenge players sometimes and keep that in the back of your mind. What goes into challenging them? What does that look like when you're in practice or in a team meeting?**

DAWN STALEY: It looks like -- it's different. It differs from player to player. It depends on what we're trying to accomplish. Like I would -- I recently had a player sit out a practice or stand over to the side. It wasn't a knee-jerk reaction. It was, We don't want to practice bad basketball. We just don't. You just don't want to practice bad basketball.

I got impatient with her after a few weeks of bad basketball. So you've got to sit and you've got to watch it. You've got to want it. You've got to force yourself to play a little bit better. So it looks look that at times.

Or we'll shrink. We'll shrink opportunities for our players to be successful. Like if you got three possessions, then something good has got to happen in these three possessions. It is that. It's like, Zia, you're playing the point guard position. Hey, let's not turn the ball over three trips down, and let's get good shots. Let's have you manage our basketball team. You run it, you tell people where they need to go, you manage the huddles. You can change our defenses if you want to change our defense.

It's things like that that just challenge them to be better and to embrace what position they're playing at that given time.

**Q. Could you speak a little bit on the NIL? Being in**

**women's basketball for a long time, how that's changed the game, the opportunity it's brought specifically to women's sports, and then also can you speak on the uniform deal that all South Carolina players are entitled to?**

DAWN STALEY: The NIL space, I think it's great. I mean, we as coaches have to take on this space just like it's X's and O's. It is. It's a big part of what we do. It's to create women who are prepared in this space, prepared to be great businesswomen, prepared to find great representation, to lead out their daily lives. It is finding opportunities for everyone to benefit like all-team deals.

We as coaches have to do that, because you'll have a locker room in which you've got the cream of the crop that's benefiting, and then you've got the players who don't play as much looking at that. And it may cause some dissension within the locker room, so you've got to protect the sanctity of the team when it comes to that.

It's great. I don't know what the numbers are on our campus, but Aliyah Boston and Zia Cooke are making a lot of money. They're making a lot of money on our campus, and our success has a lot to do with it and their play has a lot to do with it and their representation has a lot to do with it. It's a part of our game. It's a part of us being coaches and making sure that they're good.

Again, I'm just protecting the sanctity of the team. There are rules around it. We're not going to go on the road and our players can do an autograph signing on the road. We know that's not it. You can compartmentalize when we're at home what your schedule should be, but when we're on the road, we're going to stay focused on that.

So it's cool. It's another dimension to helping them become more equipped with handling life outside of basketball.

**Q. You talked about challenging players; what about you personally? How do you challenge yourself to fight complacency or battle complacency?**

DAWN STALEY: I challenge myself. Like right now I'm into intermittent fasting. I eat from 12:00 to 8:00. I don't have very long right now to get some dinner. I challenge myself in that way because I ask our players to sacrifice, and for me that's a big sacrifice.

Our staff, we give up fried foods for the season. Once we start official practice. We do have two cheat days before December 31st.

So it's that. Then I challenge myself to really watch our



team, like watch a little part of us every day to see where we can get better.

But I'm really focused on our team. Like I'm focused on -- there are not very many teams that have repeated. We want to be in that number. We've never been here in our program. Well, yeah, we have. The first time around didn't turn out too good. So we want to be better than we were the first time around.

We've got a lot more firepower to do that.

So that's the way I kind of challenge myself to be better. I'm hungry, but I'm better.

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