

# Atlantic Coast Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 8, 2024

Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

## Duke Blue Devils

## Coach Kara Lawson

## Oluchi Okananwa

### Postgame Press Conference



NC State 54, Duke 51

**KARA LAWSON:** This was a tough battle. Unfortunate for us, we came up on the short end of it. But proud of my group, how we just stuck with it. It wasn't a great night for us on the offensive end, and we never seemed to be able to make open shots or get a rhythm going there. But we were able to keep the margin close.

They pulled away a couple times, but we were able to kind of bring the game back to us. That's real growth for us in games. I can remember the game over there, Game 1 when we played them.

It started to get away in the first half and kind of stayed away from us, and in that first half, I think Jadyn and Reigan picked up two fouls, and we were able to kind of battle back to two at halftime.

The final thing for us is to be able to execute late and come out with a win. They just did a better job there late of getting stops and finishing plays.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about the end of the third quarter. You guys went on a nice run there, looked like the offense was heading -- fourth quarter you guys go cold and only score two buckets in the last eight minutes of the game. What did you see as far as going cold in the fourth quarter towards the end and not being able to score as much?**

**KARA LAWSON:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's both. It's typically both in a basketball game when something poor happens for a team. We had something to do with it, and they did, too. They're a really good defensive team. You have to credit them for making things hard for us.

Then we didn't execute well, and our decision making was poor in that fourth quarter. When we had opportunities, we didn't finish, or when we had a possession that really mattered, we didn't execute.

Again, that's what we've got to improve on. What I told the team after the game was this would feel really bad if it was the last game of the year. It would feel really bad that something this close was -- and it still feels bad, but to know that we've got two weeks to work on some things and try and get better and be ready for these moments when they come in the NCAA is an optimistic way to look at it for our young group.

**Q. The speed today, was that a part of the design to outrun NC State, because your players were beating them down the court quite a bit?**

**KARA LAWSON:** Well, the only thing I designed was I just recruited fast players. She came this way. I didn't really do anything to help her be fast. Jadyn came this way, too.

We feel like that is something that our team is playing at their best when we play with pace, and we want them to be aggressive. We love them attacking. It kind of fuels us.

We're an efficient team in transition when we run.

It definitely is a point of emphasis for us in every game, and I did think we had some good transition opportunities where we were able to finish.

**Q. You drew up two ATOs there at the end of the game, one to Oluchi cutting to the rim, and then to Kennedy. Can you walk me through the thought process with those two plays late down the stretch?**

**KARA LAWSON:** Yeah, we're just trying to get a quick score. Obviously time is on their side in that situation when you're down, so we wanted to get a quick bucket. I thought Oluchi did a fantastic job to do that. Wanted to get a look for a three. We were down three. We just missed it.

**Q. How did Ashlon come out after the game? Was it hit in the nose on that play?**



KARA LAWSON: I don't know. I don't know. I hadn't talked to her about getting hurt yet. When they said she was good, it did look like she had a scar on her face or a cut on her face, but I don't know what the prognosis is.

**Q. They started the game 10 for 16 shooting. I think it was 29 percent for NC State the rest of the way. Where do you think you guys maybe got the change that you needed to play more like you needed to defensively after that first part to early minutes of the second quarter on?**

KARA LAWSON: Oh, there's so many plays. I'm trying to remember that far back. It feels like it was two days ago, the first half.

I thought early, and we talked about this in the time-outs, I thought early we were allowing their offense to be played with rhythm, and we weren't disrupting. So the catches were easy, the reversals were easy, and they were in a rhythm, and you're probably not going to beat them if you let that happen.

We talked about it in a time-out, and I think we did in halftime, as well, that we needed to be more aggressive, pick up full, make them feel a little more uncomfortable, and I thought that contributed to it.

**Q. You were talking earlier about the lack of decision making on offense, but the one thing that really stands out is 1 for 13 for threes. Was that a particular example of that? Did you think your team was getting good shots from beyond the arc?**

KARA LAWSON: I thought the first half, we took some poor threes. I'm trying to remember second half. I didn't think we took poor ones. The two ones late we had to take. We were down three. I don't think you'd say those are poor.

I thought we had quality looks. I thought, like I said, in the first half there were a few that were early in the clock that I would have liked to have late, but we just didn't shoot it well. That happens sometimes.

**Q. Oluchi, as much as this stings, you've got more basketball to play, your first NCAA Tournament coming up in a couple of weeks. Talk about that and how this team turns the page and moves on and what you think your team has to do better in the NCAAs.**

OLUCHI OKANANWA: Yeah, Coach touched on it a bit in the locker room after the game of how all this is learning opportunities, and all of this is really just making us

stronger as a team, and we're getting the experience that we need to be ready and to compete for the tournament.

Really as we take this time and go back, we're just going to really harp on the areas that we want to improve on and bring that with us to the tournament.

**Q. Oluchi, you were part of a freshman group that plays a lot of minutes, and this was you guys' first postseason experience for college basketball. How do you think that this experience here not only gets you ready for the NCAA Tournament but also it's shown you what to expect and how to raise your level of play as you guys are going through the tournament experience?**

OLUCHI OKANANWA: Yeah, so I'm so blessed to have the opportunities to be in my first year and play as much as I do and get as much experience as I can. Just kind of repeating what I just said. This is all learning opportunities.

I think between all the freshmen, we can all agree that we're taking everything and we're absorbing it. All of this stuff that's happening, we're not just letting it happen and then throwing it away. We're, okay, why did that happen, what can we learn from this. I think that's what we're really going to take with us into tournament play.

**Q. Coach, obviously a very good defensive team you have. Just allowed 54 points today. When you coach defensively, do you focus more on a mentality or teaching the skills of defense? Which is more of a focus for you?**

KARA LAWSON: I would say first I try to recruit players that already have the mentality. It's hard to infuse that into somebody. I don't know if you've ever tried to do that or you've been around someone that doesn't have that mentality. How did that work out for you? Not well probably. We recruit players that are highly competitive and that have a mindset to work and to compete.

Then it's my job to enhance that. I don't put it in them, they have it God given. Parents put it in them. Youth league coaches, high school coaches put it in them, and then it's my job to enhance it and refine it.

How do we do that? How do we enhance and refine the mentality? Well, that is teaching technique and teaching situations and schemes, and I have a very, very good elite assistant coaching staff that teaches the fundamentals of the game and watches film with our players and teaches them that.

That's how it works. You have to have that first, though,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

the mentality before the technique. Technique with no mentality doesn't get you anywhere because you have to have competitive players, and we do, and we're fortunate to have the players that we have.

It's not lost on me that what they give me, the effort they give me, the competitiveness they bring, the team mentality they have. That's not normal in college basketball, to have what we have. I'm not saying we're better than anybody else. Don't take it that way. I'm just saying it's unique to have a group that's fully bought into each other, to play this hard defensively.

I'm lucky. I'm lucky to have this group.

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