

NCAA 2024 Women's Basketball Championship

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Caitlin Clark

Love Johnson

Nancy Nussbaum

Coach Shawn Cox

Coach Dawn Staley

AP Women's Player and Coach of the
Year Press Conference

NANCY NUSSBAUM: Hi, everyone. I'm Nancy Nussbaum, senior director of global customer communication for the Associated Press. It's my pleasure today to present the AP Women's College Basketball Player and Coach of the Year trophies.

I am based in Ohio and a native Clevelander. So I'd like to first personally welcome you all to Cleveland for what looks to be a great and another exciting Final Four.

This is the 30th season that AP has recognized a coach and player of the year in women's basketball. The recipients are selected by the same panel of journalists across the country that decides the weekly AP Top 25 poll. Voting for the awards is conducted at the end of the season and before the start of the NCAA Tournament.

Today is a rare occasion, where both recipients have been handed the trophy before. To anyone who watched this past season, neither one is a surprise pick. Both are truly icons of the sport who have set the gold standard. As a result, women's college basketball is seeing record attendance and TV audiences for games.

Both have attracted a new generation of fan, which is why we have some special guests with us today to help with the presentations.

The Associated Press wanted to include a local player and coach inspired by our winners to join me in today's presentation. It is my honor as well to introduce coach Shawn Cox and Cleveland Metropolitan School District eighth-grader Love Johnson. Love and her teammates at



Nathan Hale School were district champions this year with a 12-0 season.

I'm going to let Coach Cox talk first about how our honorees have inspired so many.

SHAWN COX: Thank you. First off, I want to thank the Associated Press for allowing us to be up here. This is an opportunity that Love and me will never forget.

But, first of all, I want to say congratulations to both Coach and Caitlin for winning this award. Not only is it hard to win this award once, but they have both, again, won it twice.

Coach Staley has two back-to-back perfect seasons and that is something that is hard to do.

And then we have Caitlin, who, again, every time she steps on the court shows how much of a dominant force she is.

So again, I want to thank you guys for letting us share the stage with you. Again, this is our first time, so thank you, again, for allowing us to be up here.

NANCY NUSSBAUM: Now for our awards. This year's AP Player of the Year is only the sixth repeat winner with Breanna Stewart being the last in 2016. She is the 20th overall recipient of the award, among others being Rebecca Lobo, Candace Parker, Maya Moore, Brittney Griner and Kelsey Plum.

Both schools represented here today also have other recent AP players of the year, including Iowa's Megan Gustafson in 2019 and South Carolina's A'Ja Wilson in 2018 and Aliyah Boston in 2022.

This year's recipient has had one of the greatest careers in NCAA history. The Iowa native this year set a single season scoring record with 1,183 points, passing Kelsey Plum's mark by 74 points to date. She also made history to become the all-time leading scorer in all of Division I college basketball history for both men or women with 3,900 points.

She passed the late Pete Maravich of LSU who set the



men's mark in 1970 with 3,667 points. Her draw-dropping shots, impressive play and expressive personality on the court have made Iowa's games hard not to watch.

This year's AP College Basketball Player of the Year is Iowa's Caitlin Clark.

(Applause)

And for our next award, this year's AP Women's College Basketball Coach of the Year has led South Carolina to back-to-back undefeated regular seasons and its fourth straight Final Four.

Her career as a coach and earlier as a player has elevated women's basketball. She is a hall of fame point guard who led the United States to three Olympic gold medals as a player and one as a coach three years ago at the Tokyo Games.

A star player at the University of Virginia, she led her team to three Final Fours and twice was the Naismith Player of the Year in 1991 and 1992. That was before AP started its annual player of the year award.

She went on to play in the American Basketball League where she was twice an all-star, and then the fledgling WNBA where she was a six-time all-star.

She then started her coaching career at Temple University. And nine years after taking over at South Carolina, she led the Gamecocks to their first-ever national championship in 2017.

She also first won the AP Coach of the Year award in 2020, after her first one-loss season.

And what she has orchestrated at South Carolina over the past three years is unmatched with only three losses total. The last coming a year ago against Iowa in the Final Four.

The span also included another national championship trophy in 2022. And she's made it no secret she's here in Cleveland to win her team's third. I mean, even her dog's name is Champ, after all.

This year's AP Coach of the Year is South Carolina's Dawn Staley.

(Applause)

We're going to let Caitlin speak and then we will go to coach Staley.

CAITLIN CLARK: Thank you. This is a tremendous honor.

And, like you said, to do it in back-to-back years and be on the same list of a lot of great players that I grew up idolizing, I grew up as a young kid watching them and wanting to be like them.

And now, to be on this stage and be in these moments for women's basketball, it's been one of the most historic seasons for women's basketball.

I'm just very fortunate and very blessed to be able to play for Coach Bluder and have somebody who has believed in me and our entire coaching staff believed in me before I even committed there. When I was really in eighth grade they started recruiting me, and have loved me the same way over the course of the last eight years.

And it's crazy to think it's all coming to an end here. But I'm just super grateful to have amazing teammates that have helped me. This is as much theirs as it is mine.

Just super fortunate and blessed to have a family and support system that are there for me every step of the way, and to be able to represent my state in the area that I grew up in is really special. Just a tremendous honor for all of us, and I'm super grateful. So thank you.

(Applause)

DAWN STALEY: I just want to congratulate you, Caitlin, for holding it down for women's basketball. And just also want to just say thank you to the AP voters for -- I mean, I know it's a subjective space to be in, and I know there are a lot of worthy coaches for this trophy to be had.

We're very fortunate, I get a chance to work with the men and women that are sitting in front of this press conference, and I can honestly say they do the heavy lifting. They certainly -- I will hoist this trophy, but certainly it is them and their works and their tirelessness and their sacrifice and their commitment to every single one of our players that makes it all make sense. I'll be remiss if I did not recognize them.

And also I'm incredibly honored, and I will have to say when things like this happen to you, that you don't -- I don't coach to win awards. I really don't. I'm very, very satisfied with being a dream merchant for our players. That's it.

I owe basketball a great deal of debt. I'm forever indebted to basketball for what it's given to me. And I'd be remiss if I did not mention when these things happen, I truly believe there's some uncommon favor when it comes from the man above.

So, thank you so much. I really appreciate it. Thank you



for everyone being here and representing, representing our sport and making us feel like women's basketball is a sport. So, thank you.

Q. Wonder if you could talk a little bit about, you've done it all weekend and last weekend too, but how inspirational you are for people like Coach and Love who are sitting up there with you, it's not just what you do on the court but how you inspire others with your play and who you are off the court.

CAITLIN CLARK: I think that's been the coolest part for myself, especially over the course of the last four years, is just I came in during COVID, and I didn't get to play in front of many fans. And obviously this year, no matter if we're at home or on the road, the arena's screaming, there's young boys and young girls that are inspired, whether you win, whether you lose, no matter how many points you score.

At the end of the day that doesn't really matter. It's the people you're inspiring, whether it's like the one sitting next to me or whether it's a young boy that wants to dream and be like us as well. I think that's been the coolest part of my journey is the way that it's evolved over the course of my career.

It's special for me because I feel like was I was just in their shoes. I was that little girl that wanted to be like them. And whenever a player I idolized, whether it was a high school player or college player took time and signed my shoe or my shirt made, it literally my world and made me want me to be a women's basketball player.

To be able to repay that is something that's super special and something that never gets old.

Q. Caitlin, Coach Staley said that she doesn't coach for awards. I imagine you don't play for awards. So what really is your "why"?

CAITLIN CLARK: I think my why is, you know, I grew up loving this game since I was a young girl. I first started playing with the boys. I think that's what's allowed me to have so much success is I play because it's fun. I don't feel the pressure. I play because I get to do it with my best friends.

My family gets to come and cheer me on every single game. And I think it brings a lot of people together. And this is kind of what just comes along with that.

And to me, like, the things that I'll remember throughout my career is really not the wins and losses but every moment in between, whether it was some young boy or girl that came up to me and was just excited to meet me, or the

moments I've shared with my teammates on and off the court, that's what means the most to me. And those are things that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

Q. Dawn, you have elevated South Carolina to a standard that we've seldom seen in the history of this game at the time that this game is as hard as it has ever been. I'm wondering if you saw this standard as possible, in terms of victories and championships and everything you've been able to do?

DAWN STALEY: I didn't envision it. I know what hard work looks like. I've been around some of the greatest women's basketball players and coaches over my career as a player. I know what that looks like.

I know what high-level basketball looks like. I know high-level people, how they treat people.

So it's ingrained in me. And I will say that if you approach it the right way, if you look at it for its innocence and its purity of the game, the game, when that's out front, you may not be able to envision it, but it will be played out in front of you like you couldn't imagine.

I think sometimes people want to say I want to be this or I want to be that, I want to be great, I want to be successful. And you sometimes skip some steps with how you deal with people and how you deal with success.

I've been humbled from the first time that I touched the basketball, and I do feel like I have the same desire and the same purity for the game, the same innocence of playing the game and treating the game the right way, that it plays out like unimaginable, like something that's unimaginable.

Yes, we can say we want to win national championships and you want to coach the best players. That's a saying, but the work that you put in to coaching those players, to winning those national championships, it's really what it's truly about, because there are a lot of experiences and memories that you create and that you try to recreate.

Like, everything I do as a coach is try to recreate what I experienced as an Olympian.

Q. Caitlin, you have taken the conversation about women's basketball to places where it hasn't been. Quite literally across the media landscape, across all of pop culture. I know it's hard when you're in it, but has there been a moment or a thing you've seen where you said, wow, even by that standard I didn't expect that?

CAITLIN CLARK: It's definitely hard. I feel like I'm so focused and locked in a lot of times I don't see a lot of it. And I think obviously women's basketball is at a place, maybe it's never been before.

But I think the game has always been just as good. There's been so much talent and so many amazing players I grew you wanting to be like. And maybe they definitely laid the foundation for us to have these opportunities and for us to really thrive on this stage, you know.

It was just a short while ago we weren't able to use the March Madness branding and ESPN was still doing whip-around coverage of our games.

I think now that we're really having the opportunity, you're seeing how good it is and how much people just want to watch. People can't get enough of it. And I think that's the coolest thing. I think the parity in our game has certainly helped. I think the amount of stars in our game has certainly helped.

There needs to be multiple stars. There's so much young talent. And our game's in a really good place going forward.

Q. I see two competitors when I look up here, and I see it on the floor as well. If you could both just comment on where that desire to compete and be the best, whether it's coaching or playing, comes from?

CAITLIN CLARK: Honestly, like, I think you're born with it. My parents knew from a very young age I was a super competitive person. I hated to lose. I loved to win.

And I think that's kind of been the challenge for me over the course of my four years is being able to channel that in the right way and help it be a positive thing for my team.

But, yeah, I think that's the best thing about women's basketball, is there's competitors, there's people that want to win. They bring fire. They bring emotion.

But yeah, I think it's just something you're born with. But also I think it stems from a lot of confidence from myself. I think the time you put in and how much you trust yourself gives you a lot of confidence. And that's where it stems from for myself.

DAWN STALEY: For me, I'm the youngest of five when we all lived in the same household when I was growing up. We had one bathroom. I mean, I had older brothers. My sister didn't play a sport.

So I was competing with my brothers in my household.

And that creates instant challenges and the ability to compete. I mean, I had to outfox my brothers because they used to take my socks. They used to wear my sneakers.

So it was that competitive drive to keep them from just taking over my stuff. Because as the youngest, you have a little small area in your house, and they know where it is and you don't really have anything of your own. And socks aren't very much, but they were mine.

Q. Coach, I've listened to you talk over time, and you talk a lot about the women's game being treated as a real sport. Also talked about the rise in popularity. What do you say to people who believe that you should get a lot of credit for that? And not just the wins and the excitement at South Carolina, but just the way you're genuine, you're relatable, the way you engage with people?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I don't really want any credit. I want our game to be treated like a sport because when you do, when you do, you get this, you get this.

I do feel like our game was being intentionally held back for one reason or another. It's not anymore. I mean, it's happened at the right time. Caitlin has a lot to do with it. The new leadership at ESPN have a lot to do with it.

They're doing things differently. They're putting our game on television every single night. Again, I've watched a lot of games all season long because we had access.

Not just ESPN, we're on ABC, we're on Fox. We're on all the national news stations. And because of that -- they don't do it just because they want to crap shoot it. They know. They know their numbers are behind watching some of our very talented players. And now the numbers are staggering.

You can't tell me we just all of a sudden just started playing good basketball. You can't tell me that. So I'm looking forward to our game getting even bigger, even bigger.

I know we'll lose Caitlin to the WNBA next year, but she'll leave a legacy of viewership. She'll leave a legacy of lowans. I know you didn't get a lot of people in the stands your freshman year, but they made for it, trust me, in a big way.

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