

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - North Carolina vs South Carolina

Saturday, March 23, 2024
Columbia, South Carolina, USA
Colonial Life Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Raven Johnson

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to get started with the South Carolina Gamecocks.

Gamecocks are 33-0 and the No. 1 seed in the Albany 1 Regional. They advance to the second round with a 91-39 win over Presbyterian. We're joined by Head Coach Dawn Staley and student-athletes Raven Johnson and Te-Hina Paopao.

Coach, if you would, please make an opening statement.

DAWN STALEY: We're excited to move to the second round. Obviously it's a familiar nonconference opponent, and we look forward to seeing the adjustment they'll make and the adjustments we'll make, and it should make for a great game.

Q. Te-Hina, what do you remember about playing North Carolina the first time around this year? How do you think that matchup will help you -- or that experience can help you guys going forward?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: From what I remember from the game is that they were physical, they were really aggressive, and they came out swinging first. That took us a while to adjust, so we had to come out swinging first and punching first.

We've just got to come out with aggression and be physical and just be who we are.

Q. Raven, this is your second tournament you've played through here now. Does it feel different than



last year? How do you feel right now compared to maybe how you felt at this time last year?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I feel very confident. I think me and my team feel very confident. So we're just going to take one game at a time.

Q. I asked Dawn about this a few days ago. Lisa Boyer has been part of the program for so long. Do either of you have a favorite Boyer story that shows who she is and how she helps you as a coach or anything?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Boyer is one of my favorite people I like to mess with. I mess with her every day. Every day after practice I always give her affirmation that she always do good no matter what she does. She can just be there because her presence is good.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: There's been some great memories with Coach Boyer. I just think it's funny when she gets us to be quiet during our scout because we talk too much. She just be like, Hey, Coach is talking! We all just giggle a little because she has to say it five, ten times, and we still don't listen.

That's probably one of my favorite memories of Boyer because she always does that because we talk too much.

Q. How does getting Kamilla back and on the assumption that Bree comes back tomorrow kind of add onto the momentum that you guys already built with the first round victory?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: We're really excited to have Milla back. We missed her presence, but we prepared for it earlier in the season, and we did a pretty good job of doing that. We're just really excited to have her back on the court with us. We miss her presence and can't wait to see what she does in this tournament.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, what Pao said.

Q. Te-Hina, I know the job's not done yet, but what has the season meant to you? I think that video that you

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

and your dad posted about you coming back, he kind of touched on you rediscovered your love of basketball kind of there. Did you lose that a little bit, and has this experience here helped you regain some of that?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: For sure, I lost a little bit of it, but it's always going to be there. This season has meant so much to me and the team. It's been very special. We were very proud of our journey so far, but as you said, the job's not done. We've still got business to handle. We've just got to keep taking one day, one practice, one game at a time.

Q. Raven, can you speak a little bit to what Te-Hina brings to your team, how she contributes, what she means to you all?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Te-Hina, she brings a lot to this team. She's a leader on and off the court, and she's experienced. There's no better way than to learn from her. Just the things that she brings, she can shoot the ball, she can score at three levels.

She taught me a lot of things like go from slow to fast, like Coach tells me every day. And just think of the game in a different way. So I think she brings a lot to this team.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Defensively nothing? Just offense?

(Laughter).

Q. Te-Hina, another question. Obviously you knew you can shoot the ball coming here. You knew you'd be able to make shots from the outside. I don't know that you thought you were going to make nearly 50 percent of your three-pointers coming into this season. What does this team and the people they have on it, how does that enhance the opportunity you have to take the right shots from outside, the ones you're very confident in?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: When you play with these type of players who are really good at their job and play their role really well, it helps your game open up a little more and getting open shots and when to take them and when to take bad shots.

They do a really good job finding me in transition in the half-court. I'm really blessed to have teammates like that that just find me and know that I can knock it down for them.

THE MODERATOR: Any more questions for the student-athletes? You can go back to the locker room.

DAWN STALEY: You can stay, Champ.

THE MODERATOR: Champ not taking questions today?

DAWN STALEY: He said until he gets a nameplate, he's not answering any questions.

Q. Just a housekeeping thing. Bree Hall again, is there any change from yesterday, what you said, you still expect her to play tomorrow?

DAWN STALEY: Yes, yes, yes. She'll be at practice today, and she'll be moving around doing her thing.

Q. Dawn, obviously North Carolina gave you guys everything you could handle back in November, two years ago in Greensboro it was tight. What is it about what Coach Banghart has done up there and the scheme she has to kind of thwart you guys a little bit?

DAWN STALEY: I don't think they changed their schemes for us. It's their way. Obviously they're a really good defensive team. They do a great job at just keeping you from great scoring opportunities, high percentage scoring opportunities. They make you pay.

Then they have a fast pace offensively. They move down the floor from a transitional standpoint, getting easy buckets. And then in the half-court they're just really calculated and methodical who they want shooting the basketball, and they always seem to put their players in the right place.

So they don't really take a whole lot of ill-advised shots. If they do, they've got rebounders. Ustby has a real knack for rebounding the basketball.

Q. How have you seen Te-Hina grow this season?

DAWN STALEY: I just think that she's -- and I didn't know her before she came here. I think she's just very comfortable in her skin and giving us who she is. I don't know if that's a growth thing for us, just over time she's really just peeled down her layers and she's given us all of her in a short period of time.

That's what I truly like. She's who she is. There's no changing. So I like the fact that she's given us the depth of who she is, and that takes a long time. I'm glad we get to share one more year with her so she can give us even more.

I hope in return we're giving her what she's given us.

Q. Coach, I asked MiLaysia yesterday what her

ASAP . . . when all is said, we're done.®
sports

welcome to college basketball moment was, and she pointed to that UNC game where she only played three minutes. How have you seen her develop on the court and mentally since that game?

DAWN STALEY: It was a moment in her young college career in which there hasn't been another moment like that. So it was a defining moment. It was a moment in which some growth took place because she's so used to playing, she's so used to participating. In that particular game, I thought the things that she wasn't doing for us hurt us. Then the things that she could possibly do for us didn't work out for one reason or another.

I mean, North Carolina plays a certain way. You're either going to be as aggressive as they are or not, and I just don't think she was as aggressive.

What she's learned is she's got to play some D. She's got to play some D. And she has taken it upon herself to play some defense. Her on-ball defense has -- it's getting to the point where it's really, really, really good. Her off-ball defense needs a little bit of work, but for what she's been able to do defensively has been great in her young career.

She'll be a much different player. Obviously she told me that because I kind of looked at her when it came to us having to play them and what took place, and she just said, I'm going to be different, and she will.

Q. Dawn, you're going to leave here having played two teams you already played in the regular season. Do you like the way the brackets can be set up this way where you are going to face some opponents that you've played previously this year?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I like it as far as familiarity. I also don't like it in that I'd like to play somebody else, just the newness of it, just branching out with different challenges.

Although North Carolina is going to be a challenge for us, no doubt about it. But it's cool because we've got a scouting report. We can see how far they've improved. We can see some areas in which we can hopefully gain an advantage in how they've played. So it's pretty cool.

But we were all ready to play both of them, Michigan State and North Carolina.

Q. Obviously injury plays a part, but for Adhel to just be with the team in March Madness, how much does that help her down the line?

DAWN STALEY: I'm super excited about Adhel, one, that

she was -- I mean, it's a testament when a young person cannot -- like football players, they plan to graduate early so they get to have early enrollment. When it's someone like a girls basketball player, they have to be well prepared.

Then when this came up, when her injury came up, we took a deep dive into seeing if she could actually get the course work done to graduate early, and she was right there. It didn't take much. It does take some communication and partnerships with her high school, who was prepared to allow her to do that. Her high school coach was great in helping us expedite it.

Then for her to be around it is -- for her, I would think it's quite incredible. We try to keep her involved in our scouting report so she has an understanding. Like before we played LSU for the championship, I asked the team, I was like, Do you all remember how -- you know what LSU does in ball screen action offensively? And there was a silence over the room. Adhel is like, Yeah, they pop, and they pop.

I can't wait because she's -- I equate her defensively to Aliyah Boston. She's communicative, she's high IQ, and she can move. I know she doesn't move very fast right now because she's on crutches, but she can really move.

Then from an offensive standpoint, I really feel like she can impose her will. She's got great footwork, great hands, great IQ, can kick it out. I'm really excited about her progression and what she'll bring to our program.

Q. Deja Kelly has played pretty well against you all in the Sweet 16 two years ago and in November. What makes her a challenging assignment defensively?

DAWN STALEY: She can score. She can score right away. She can hit the three ball. Her midrange is what she does best. She can get to the basket. And most importantly, she can make you foul her so she gets to the free-throw line.

So any time you have a player like that that can score on those three levels, it's hard. And she's a killer. She wants to win. She's super competitive.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

