

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - Indiana vs South Carolina

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Times Union Center

South Carolina Gamecocks
Coach Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Chloe Kitts

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

Q. Dawn, Tessa Johnson's jump shot, specifically her three-pointer, the first question is have you ever seen one that goes up as high as it did, and the second is when you first saw it, did you ever try to change it?

DAWN STALEY: Tessa's three-point high-arching shot looks pretty when it goes in, and it looks like it's going to go in every time she shoots the basketball. Didn't try to change it. She scored a lot of points in the state of Minnesota. If it's not broken, we're not going to try to fix it, and it's working out well. We probably need to get her more shots, so we're not getting her enough shots to see that ball trajectory hit the ceiling.

I think she's playing extremely well, not just shooting the basketball but what she does on both sides of the basketball. It's pretty impressive.

Q. During the portion of practice that we could see, you looked loose, you're smiling, joking with players. How would you describe the intensity and energy here now that you've reached the Sweet 16?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we've got a pretty loose team. You saw the beginning of practice and they were pretty focused for about 30 minutes, and then they went into a mode of being really loose but focused. I think they're probably more focused than they've ever been.

But for certain amount of time in practice, I'm real thankful to the NCAA only gave us 60 minutes because I couldn't take any more than 60 minutes.



Q. The theme for this year for the team was love. What is it that you are loving right now about this team's mindset and preparation?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I really love this team, one, for just being their organic selves. We've tried to change them. We've tried to get them to focus a little bit longer. But they've created this identity where they hold each other accountable. They are in lockstep with each other.

It was this that was created out of the love for each other. We've had this before, but in a different way, like in a more focused way. Here this year this team focuses for a period of time, and they make you feel uncomfortably comfortable with how they approach the game, and then on game day, I would say 75 percent of the time they've gotten us to a good place during the game, whether that's the first, second or third quarters or if we needed to finish the game in the fourth quarter.

I never feel like we're ever going to lose the game. It's because of the love they have for each other and the love they have for winning.

Q. The viewership numbers are through the roof. The attendance numbers are through the roof, thanks to you guys are a huge part of that. You get to play now on Friday-Sunday instead of Saturday-Monday. Do you like where the tournament is right now? Is there anything you would want to change going forward, or do you like having the top 16 host and that sort of thing?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I'm pretty comfortable with -- I'm not just saying that because we get to host. We've earned it. The top 16 seeds in the country have earned it. I think it cleans up the game a little bit, and it leaves, I would say, less of the control into the hands of the committee who has a big job.

So if we can get the 16 squared away, it helps them concentrate on the other areas. And I do think that people on their campuses have done a great job getting people to attend the game. I think our game is in a really good place.



I mean, the viewership numbers are there. The attendance is there. The star power is there. The coaching is there. The backing of administrators for us, our local media has always been there; like always have covered our team.

It's pretty cool to see. I hope that every team that's here sends their local media because they do the heavy lifting of following the teams and getting it out to the national media.

Q. You said that you really feel like MiLaysia respects the game. What is it about her that makes you feel that way?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, one, it gets her going to class. Big. It's huge. It's hard. Like I think MiLaysia is one that -- she was a star of her high school, so I'm sure she's got a charismatic personality, she's funny, she's smart. So she probably utilized that to probably come late some days at her high school.

When you make that transition to college, it's different. Professors want to see your face. They want to make sure that you are entertaining them in their classroom, in their setting, just like she entertains everybody else on the basketball court.

For the love of the game, she does the things that she doesn't want to do so she can continue to love up on the game.

Q. You guys have started fast. You played really strong first quarters and first halves overall. What do you view the key to starting fast is, and is that something you message at this point in the season or do you assume that you guys are going to come out the way you have all year?

DAWN STALEY: We've had some slow starts. I think with this particular -- I think we've started out quick and then somewhere in the middle of the season people have jumped out on us, and then we haven't responded well until later on in the game.

But I think now, I just think we're playing our best basketball. I questioned it going into the SEC tournament and then during the SEC tournament. We weren't just clicking on both sides of the basketball. There were spurts of it, but when we had a little bit of time to practice between the SEC tournament championship and then our first round, I mean, we did a lot of rest, but then when we got back from our break, we just really honed in.

They were probably -- they probably thought I was a little tight, they would say. It's not that I was tight, it was more

so that I knew what was coming down the pipeline.

They just have a way of making me feel uncomfortable.

I'm a look, sound, feel coach. If something looks, sounds or feels off, then I'm going to address it and put whatever prep we need to -- whatever challenges we need to put in front of them, they have to meet those challenges. I thought they really did a good job of meeting the challenges leading up to the first and second round.

I do think they're still there as far as practice. Although it's shorter, but you know it's in there. It's really in there. They're paying attention.

Q. In talking with the general manager here at the arena, he said they expected this to be the biggest NCAA event that they've ever hosted, and they've hosted many. He also expected it to be the biggest economic impact in the city, in the community. What does that say about the growth of the women's game and the draw, bringing all those people into the city?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's a double-edged sword when it comes to this answer. One is, I've said it before, that it's been intentional to hold women's basketball back. I do. It's no longer intentional anymore because they see we're bursting at the seams, and for the general manager to say that, he's going to ride this wave as long as it's high. It's high right now.

We just want to be a sport. We just want to be treated as a sport. We just want an opportunity to be seen, and I do feel like there has been -- it's been very intentional to put us on TV, like our sport on TV everywhere. I've watched so many basketball games this season. I had access to so many games, so many Pac-12 games, Big Ten games, SEC games. Like you really had a choice to make.

I had to be intentional what game I was going to watch on any given day. That's been super cool.

If I feel like that and I'm a women's basketball enthusiast, I know there was access to so many other people, and they've tuned in and they've come into arenas and they've attended games.

It's pretty cool to see us forcing our way into the space, and I just don't think we're going to slow down anytime soon.

Q. Kind of a good follow-up to that, I was just wondering about those games on TV specifically getting them on ESPN, ABC, FOX, like the main channels. I think you guys had eight ESPN games, three ABC games this season. Is that the No. 1 way,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

given where the game is, to move it forward and find more fans? Is TV the No. One thing?

DAWN STALEY: I think that's part of it. But if ABC -- if we're on ABC, it's probably only two games on a Sunday. It's four teams. And it's probably the same teams playing on ABC.

We've got to broaden that. Although we know the teams that are playing on ABC are the most viewed teams, the most popular teams. There's more popular teams out there that we're not broadcasting, and I know you have to start somewhere, so I don't mind them starting where they can get the more bang for their buck and grow the game.

But when we get to a place where it doesn't matter but it matters -- like I'd like to see USC, the Trojans on. I'd like to see them. JuJu has got a big name, but the team, they're a good team. We know there's more than JuJu, so I want to know more about the rest of the roster for me because there's a possibility we'll play them, so I want to have access to it. I want to sit down in my living room and watch them.

It's that part of it, and I'm sure it'll get there. I'm sure they'll play some ABC games next season.

Q. This year we've seen a lot of records be called up, whether they've been broken or players keeping them, Jackie Stiles, Kelsey Mitchell, even Pearl Moore.

When you see that pioneers of the game, even pioneers of the AIAW before the NCAA are a part of the conversation of arguably one of the biggest women's basketball seasons that we've seen, what do you see as the value added and the power in that, and how do you introduce maybe some of those names to your players?

DAWN STALEY: Here's the thing: Those are the forgotten names, and they're only brought up because there's a record that was being broken where we haven't done a great job at historically producing documentaries on the history of women's basketball. We have to do a better job.

Like this day and age will be documented and told a million times, and I hope when that's being told that we pull from the legends, the people that have -- we're standing on their shoulders because of what they've done, and what they've done should not be forgotten.

It's cool to hear those names being brought up in conversations because records have been broken. Now we need to do the entire documentary on it. This was then, this is now, and this is how we're going to move forward with some of the more popular names that are out there in

our game.

Q. Last time you faced Indiana, 2019-2020 season they handed you your only loss of the season. What role did that play in your team going on and not losing another game that season?

DAWN STALEY: Well, with this team, nothing. With me, it's a vivid game that I remember us losing in the Virgin Islands. I actually looked back at that box score. They scored 20 fourth quarter points. We scored six. Yikes. It's a really good game. It was a very physical basketball game. It was probably one of the games that -- we haven't lost very many of them, so I remember the ones that we've lost over the past couple of seasons.

But well-coached team, did what they needed to do to win, but something good actually came out of that particular loss. We ended up winning that tournament in the Virgin Islands on points, so that was kind of cool to do that in Aliyah's hometown. We had an island party after that. It was really cool.

Q. I understand the one game at a time mentality, but your team, but your team is four games away from becoming just the fifth school to go undefeated in a season. How aware is your team of that history? How important is it to them, and how much pressure are they feeling?

DAWN STALEY: They have zero idea. They have short memories. I mean, they only deal with the present, which is pretty cool. You don't have to talk them off of a ledge because their thinking is going to be an easy thing. They take one game at a time.

I would say this: During the time between the SEC tournament championship and that prep time, I thought we were a little loose, and I thought we thought it was going to be easy moving forward, and my energy spoke to we've got to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing right now is our next opponent.

We didn't know who our opponent was at that time, and then we had to do media for the first round, and I did hear our players talk about some stuff I've never heard them talk about that's in the future, and I'm like, no, we have to talk about Presbyterian. That is the only team that matters at this point.

Like right now Indiana is the only team that matters at this point because the margin of victory is so small at this stage of the game.

This team really doesn't know that. They know it from



playing in the SEC and coming to some near losses. But they don't know it on this scale in the NCAA Tournament. So I just want to keep them focused on what's right in front of us.

Q. Coach, obviously you've gone against a lot of great post players and perimeter players, but I wonder if you could give some thoughts on Holmes and shooters for Indiana and maybe the different challenges, especially with Holmes having the experience she has inside?

DAWN STALEY: When I think of Holmes, I think of Pili and I think of Utah. To have play them gives us some familiarity with how they keep you balanced. Pili was one that you can get her the ball and she can go to work. I've got nightmares from that because we couldn't stop her.

So we have to do a better job. Holmes is very similar in the paint. Pili was all over the place. Pili could bang a three, Pili can go mid-range, Pili can take you off the dribble.

I think Holmes is one that she does her damage in the paint. If we can get her to take some 15-footers, we're doing our job. But we know that 90 to 95 percent of what she's going to do is work us over in the paint.

Our positioning is going to be great, have to be great in order to contain her, and then their perimeter players have the ability to shoot the ball. They're one of the most efficient teams offensively in the country, so we need to disrupt, we need to make them play a little bit faster than they want to play, and our defense definitely has to show up.

From an offensive standpoint, depending on how they play us, whether they play off of us or whether they get into us or somewhere in between, we have to move the basketball. The ball can't stick. I think we're our best when we've gotten a reversal or two and everybody touches the ball and makes the defense move. Hopefully we can have some of what we brought to the table in the first and second round.

Q. You mentioned the 2019 game. IU, similar, different than the team you scouted back then? What are common threads you've seen from them back then? Mackenzie is the only person left on that team now.

DAWN STALEY: I think basketball from then until now is much better. Like in that short period of time, players are better. Like freshmen are better because they've seen women play at the top of their games, so they come in much better prepared for situations like this.

They can be very similar in style of play, but they can be more efficient at what they're doing, and to me that's what Indiana is. They're more efficient with what they're doing, and it doesn't matter their age. Teri does a great job of coaching up her team on both sides of the basketball. It won't be a cake walk. I hope it is, favoring us, but I know in my heart of hearts, in my basketball knowledge and understanding of prepping for them, it's going to be a really hard game.

Q. Te-Hina, I understand you guys are focused on the next game, but you're four games away from doing something -- you'd be the fifth school in the country to ever go undefeated. How much would that mean to you? How much are you guys aware of that, and how much pressure are you putting on yourselves to complete the season the way you want to?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, we've had a great season so far. We're really excited. We have been looking forward to the next four games, but as you said, we're taking one game at a time.

I think we'll be very proud of ourselves for our journey so far. Not a lot of teams have done this before, so just being able to be the fifth team to win the whole thing, go undefeated, it's something that says a lot to our program and to the culture that Coach has built.

There's really no pressure at all. We just keep being who we are, keep playing with a chip on our shoulder and just play freely. That's how she coaches us, and we're going to keep doing that, and we're just really excited to get it going.

Q. When Coach Staley was just up here, she said after you guys won the SEC tournament that she heard some conversations she'd never heard from you guys just thinking more to the future, and she's like, it's just about Presbyterian now. Was there a moment when she spoke to you and was honing it in on just focusing on the next opponent?

CHLOE KITTS: She spoke to us a couple of times because we were talking about the future, talking about the championship game and all this, but she just had to get our minds straight because when you take one game at a time -- because at the end of the day, it could be our last game. It's not going to be, but we can't look in the future too far.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, she did mention that. We were talking about hey, we have six games left, but at the same time, it's like, hey, we've got to take one game at a time because that part of the season is where it's like you either win or go home, and I know we definitely don't want to go home. So we're going to take one game and we are going

to play like it's our last.

Q. For both players, what kind of challenges does Indiana present when they play with that inside-outside combination of Holmes and Scalia?

CHLOE KITTS: They have a really good high-low game so we need to be able to try and take that away and they also have shooters and they move well, so we've just got to lock in on defense and Coach will put us in a good situation, and we've had a couple good practices and we're ready for them.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, as she said, they have a really good inside-outside game so we as guards are going to have to do a good job at guarding perimeter and trusting our posts that they'll lock down Holmes and do what they can, and at the end of the day we've just got to play team defense and stop Scalia, obviously, and then stop their next leading scorer and just play team defense and lock in.

Q. Chloe, whenever a team like you is running through a season, obviously the neutral fans tend to root for the underdogs. Do you guys kind of relish the role of wearing the black hats when you go into arenas and being the team that everyone wants to shoot down?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: You know, we just come in the gym -- we're going to come in the gym wanting to compete, wanting to win, and if that's who we've got to be, that's who we're going to be. They can paint us to whoever they want us to be, but at the end of the day, whoever wins the game is the winner. We're just going to come into every gym with the mindset that we're going to win, and it's either win or go home, and I know we definitely don't want to go home.

CHLOE KITTS: Yeah, we're not really worried about outside talk. We're just kind of all together, and we keep stuff in between our team. We're a big family, so we don't really worry about what anybody else says about us.

Q. Chloe, you guys were undefeated at this point last season, as well, and obviously came up just a little short. I'm wondering for the returning players, lessons learned from last season that can help you guys now headed into this run?

CHLOE KITTS: Well, last year was heartbreaking losing that game, and the people who were here last year, we feel that. We still kind of feel that.

We don't ever want to feel like that again, so we just -- we try not to think about that game because we haven't -- the girls, the new girls, they weren't there, so we kind of threw that under the bus and we're just worried about the future

and they just want to win so bad, and it just makes us want it more.

Q. Te-Hina, talk about the impact Coach Staley has had on you on and off the court.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Well, she's had a great impact on my life on and off the court. On the court, she's a mastermind on the basketball court and she knows what she's doing, obviously. She's been in this for quite a while, one of the icons in the game.

She's just been helping me as a point guard just make the right reads and giving me confidence on the court, and off the court she just teaches discipline, and she's all about discipline and the standard, and that's helped me grow as a woman, and I really appreciate her for that.

Obviously the job is not done, and I'm just really grateful to have her in my corner.

CHLOE KITTS: She's helped me a lot, especially last year coming in halfway. I was young, and it was really hard for me, so just being able to go to her in her office and talk to her every day just helped me so much on the court, just confidence-wise. It's just been such big difference.

Then off the court she's been teaching me to mature and grow up because that's what I need to do. She's been helping me with that a lot. She's just someone I look up to, especially when I was younger I always looked up to her. Being around her I just try and ask as much questions as I can and try to get everything I can from her while I'm here.

Q. Te-Hina, this seems to be the year of the guard in college basketball. Why do you think there's such a crop of amazing talent across the country? Was it something you guys were watching growing up? Is it just the position itself and how it's grown? Why do you think there's so much focus on guard play this season?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I think there's so much focus on guard play this season because there's so many guards this year. There's actually really good guards this year. When I was little, I used to watch a lot of basketball, and there was a lot of big guards, big wings, and nowadays it's a lot of guards who are really shifty or play with a lot of flair, a lot of spice, and I think that's what a lot of people have been looking towards the women's game is how much spice they can bring, how much flavor they can bring to the game.

One of our guards, Lay, she's a prime example of that and she's only going to grow from here and she's one of those guards that play with spice and flavor. She's Lay with the

butta, so obviously there's going to be a lot of guards like that that play with so much confidence and just go out there and hoop, and it's a great sight to see, and I'm excited to see what the future holds for guards.

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