

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Final - Oregon State vs South Carolina

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Sania Feagin

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

Q. I'm curious how much at this time of the year do you try to fix things from yesterday that didn't go well versus, okay, that's done, let's focus on the next game, so to speak?

DAWN STALEY: If there's some similarities, we try to fix it. There's some similarities in how our 4s have to defend the three-point line.

But at this point, it's about just being able to play to the habits that you've created all season long, and when they go haywire, you're just trying to, in real time, make adjustments. That's what it's about at this stage of the game.

So not a whole lot of screaming and yelling. Just kind of showing them what we need to do. I think they know. I think this moment will allow them to just rely on those habits.

Q. Coach Staley, I actually have a question for you from one of the fans, who says you have five new starters, are rebuilding according to some. Nobody could have predicted you would be undefeated in the Elite 8, but here we are --

DAWN STALEY: Including me.

Q. When did you know this team was special? Is there a particular game or moment that you remember?

DAWN STALEY: I don't know. I don't allow this team to



take me to categories because I just stay in real time with them because if you categorize them, it's hard. I mean, it's hard.

I would say their competitiveness in practice is what really allows me to go to a place where I knew that they don't like to lose. I have to credit our male practice squad, the Highlighters. The Highlighters are really, really, really good.

Although a lot of times they beat us in practice, a lot of times they beat us, so it makes it easier when we're able to just come out and play our competition because the Highlighters, no matter what the speed of our opponents are, they're much quicker. They do it at a much faster pace. So they've allowed us to see the game a little slower if teams aren't as quick as our Highlighters.

It's more about practice and preparation, and obviously we're getting the results from that preparation.

Q. You talked yesterday about seeing in Raven's eyes that she wasn't going to let you all lose that game, and there have been other players who had clutch moments, like Bree and Kamilla, in close games. Does this team have a clutch gene, or do you think that sells the preparation short?

DAWN STALEY: I think it's the competitive piece. Like they don't want to lose, and they have an uncanny way of figuring it out, player by player. They're not fazed by losing a 22-point lead or going down double digits. They're not fazed by it. It's unbelievable to see how they handle adverse situations all season long.

It's more about the character of this team than just pointing out a player having a good game and meeting the moment. It's been a little bit of everybody, so it's the fabric of what they've created.

Q. You've had MiLaysia now for close to a full year. How do you like her ability to bounce back after maybe her not usual performance? Because yesterday didn't go so well. How have you seen her respond from bad games previously?



DAWN STALEY: She was due, though. She was due because she's been playing at a really high level. People, they scheme. I do think Lay makes bad shots, so when you make bad shots, you create -- like I cannot take and make any shot. Sometimes when her bad shots don't go in, it creates a disadvantage on the other end.

But we live with it. She's hit so many bad shots, and she's actually opened the game up for us. So we have to take those hits. She'll have to learn.

But her bounce-back game is pretty incredible, so I'm looking forward to seeing how she comes out against Oregon State. She was great in practice. I think she's got that spark in her eye, knowing that she wants to come out and play well.

Q. During the SEC tournament, there were a lot of questions celebrating you guys, and you talked about 50/50 games are not always going to go our way. Yesterday we were asking a lot of questions, talking about big moments your players came through, and you said, well, we blew a 20-point lead. Is that a message for your team? Is that a message that you're trying to communicate? Or are there legitimate things you're worried about during the season where you've been undefeated and better than you were last year?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I'm worried every day. Every day. Every single day. They're still very young. They've had young moments. They've had mature moments. They've had questionable moments. But we sit here where we are. I don't lose sight of not giving them the credit that they deserve being in this place. We're a really good basketball team that can have some moments.

It's more for them. It's more for everybody to understand that we're young. Indiana is a seasoned basketball team. Like I was afraid of the experience that they were bringing into the game. We were fortunate enough to just get out to a big lead and a cushion, so to speak. But again, our team sometimes when we have a cushion like that, we can take it to another level, we can open it up to 30 and 40, or we can lose it and take it down to 10 or lose a lead.

But again, they're never fazed by it. We called it this -- even our coaches were like, are you drinking the Kool-Aid? A lot of times we're saying we're sipping but we're not going to take a full gulp, as to how good this team is.

Q. Raven talked yesterday about not wanting to lose, not wanting anyone to be able to sag off her like they did last year. How has her game and her mindset changed? Is there any one point that you can pinpoint

where you saw a change or where you saw that she really kind of changed her mindset?

DAWN STALEY: I think with Raven it's more of she's outwardly saying that -- she's not one that outwardly speaks about things like that, so obviously it hurt her. There's pain behind what she's saying.

But she replaced it with work ethic and getting in the gym and trying to dispel that because it was an embarrassing moment for her and all of social media. They're young; they're into social media. It was an embarrassing moment.

But again, she was 50 percent from the floor. She was 3 for 6 in the game. I just want her to replace all of that with you're 50 percent from three. If you can be 50 percent from three, you're going to increase our chances of winning basketball games.

I think she's just growing up and maturing and finding her voice through an adverse situation.

Q. This will be the third time you guys have faced Oregon State in the March Madness tournament. Coach Rueck kind of joked about it, that every time they make it to the tournament, they seem to face you guys. What's it like facing an Oregon State squad led by Coach Rueck, and what do you recall from the first two meetings in the March Madness tournament that you might take into this game tomorrow?

DAWN STALEY: Well-coached, real calculated and disciplined to playing the style of play that they want. Just disciplined. They slow the game down at a pace that if you don't stay engaged, they're going to make you pay. They're pretty stingy when it comes to defending.

You have to be really disciplined. Like you've got to out-discipline them on both sides of the basketball to win this game. For the most part in playing them, I thought we did a pretty good job with disrupting, and we're going to have to do a really good job disrupting, as well.

I think we played them in '21 and then '18, if I'm not mistaken. '14, too? Yeah, so...

That's our local media. They keep me right.

Q. There was obviously a big storyline in the game before yours yesterday involving a nose ring. I was wondering if you were told at any point yesterday about the players on your team not wearing jewelry, or were you alerted to anything?

DAWN STALEY: No, I wasn't alerted to anything. But



obviously our players are into social media. They saw what took place.

It's strange because as much as during practice -- in the beginning of the season, we were on piercings alert, hey, take that out, take that out, take that out, don't come in here with that, don't come in the weight room with that. I don't have any more stamina to fight that. I don't.

I guess the NCAA didn't have stamina to do it during the regular season, so they got enough to do it now. You've got to adhere to the rules of real time, and if it cramps the player's style, you shouldn't have been wearing it in the first place.

I don't know. I don't want any distractions for our team. I want our team to be able to just ride the wave that they're on. If you're dealt with a little bit of adversity in taking out one of your piercings, just do it. Keep the main thing the main thing.

Q. I want to go back to the Kool-Aid. You said y'all are sipping the Kool-Aid, not gulping it down. When it comes to you and the coaching staff, especially late in games, what is that balancing act of being able to give directive as a coaching staff versus making sure to keep that confidence in your team so they can execute on the floor?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I mean, we have a coaching staff full of different emotional types. Jolette is kind of calm and cool. Mary is just calm, just thoughtful. Khadijah is wild. She's our youthful energy. Coach Boyer is -- I mean, she's got stamina to talk about basketball and what's happening every single pass. Not possession, pass. If it's not perfected in the way that her vision sees it, we hear about it, and it's almost too much.

I think I meet the moment. Whatever the moment demands, I'm going to be there.

I think it's a little bit of all of us, but our players have really embraced all of our personalities to the point where they know it's coming from a place of wanting us to be successful. So they don't really take us as -- it's not stabbing their confidence. It's more lifting them up and making sure that they're adhering to the habits that we're preaching.

Q. You guys obviously have had a phenomenal year, and I really love the balanced attack that you've had on the offensive and the defensive end and also just the point spread. Thinking about this team being young and also thinking about this tournament, every game is a new game, for you, without diving too much into your

playbook and giving it away, is there one facet of this team's collectiveness and ability that you are still waiting to see, that if you are able to see it in this tourney, will change the game for you guys?

DAWN STALEY: If we could put four quarters together, I think we would be an incredible team to play against. We haven't done it yet. We've put a great half together. We've put three great quarters together.

But it's a testament to the talent. There are talented teams in our sport, and there aren't very many teams that can play four quarters of perfect basketball.

That's what we preach as coaches. That's what we want. We don't want a let-down. Knowing that you're going to have a let-down, it just can't be as big as -- or put you in a position of losing the basketball game.

So it's just that part of it. Our ability to continue to move the ball offensively and find who should shoot it, and then to be locked in step and linked up defensively, where we're communicating, we're flying all over the place, but it's a disciplined execution of our game plan.

Q. You've played with and coached a lot of very passionate post players, very physical, and it can get really emotional. How have you worked with Kamilla in terms of you want that passion but not letting it be a detriment at all to her?

DAWN STALEY: Hmm. I want more passionate Kamilla. Yesterday I thought she put it all together on both sides of the basketball. I thought she was calculating. I thought she was determined. I thought she had a we're-not-losing-today mentality.

She's not always been that. She's been smiling Kamilla. She's been just kind of happy-go-lucky. I want her to flip it. I want her to be like Killer Milla. I do. I want her to be just that for us.

Kamilla is growing and maturing and trying to figure things out, trying to see if these are her last college days, whether she's going to take the step and go to the other side of playing professional basketball. Like all of our players that are fortunate enough to be in that decision-making phase, it plays on you. It plays on you. It really does. They all go through it, one step in, one step out.

I think she's enjoying this team, like really, really enjoying this team, so much that I think it's her last days. I think.

But she's enjoying it so much that she probably doesn't want to let go because she's having so much fun with this

team. Whatever she decides, we're going to be -- I'm going to be happy for her because I know she's going to be a top pick. I know that her better days are ahead of her, so I'm looking forward to it.

Q. Te-Hina, you have always been an elite shooter, but you managed to hit over 47 percent of your threes this year. It's part of what seemed like a team-wide trend where everyone leveled up with your percentage across the board. What is the commonality that's allowing so many of you to become the best three-point shooting team in the country this year?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Just the coaches' confidence in us. We know that we can play. We know we can hoop. But we've just got to play as a team, and that's what we've been doing so far. When you see one person knocking down shots, everyone is going to start knocking down shots, and it's going to be a good day when everyone knocks down shots.

It's just the confidence piece that a lot of players miss on different teams. So just having a coaching staff that believe in you and have confidence in you to knock it down is great to have, and I think that's the commonality amongst us.

Q. Te-Hina, for three years of your career, you were very familiar with Oregon State, and of course in your first year of transferring to South Carolina, lo and behold, you're facing Oregon State again. What do you recall from your time at Oregon facing the Beavers, and what's it been like preparing in just a single day knowing you're about to face a former in-state rival that obviously you had a lot of experiences against?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, I thought I escaped Oregon State coming to South Carolina. But it's going to be so much fun. I have a really good relationship with Scott. His team is in the Pac-12. But I'm very well known with them.

I told the team they're a half court team. They run the clock to like 10 seconds within, and they're just really half court, very methodical, they run their players really well. I just told them it's going to be a half court game, and we've got to guard everything. There's going to be a lot of ball screens today.

Obviously Talia is a really good point guard. She can shoot from deep range and then they have Beers, who's a really strong presence in the paint.

I just told them we've got to lock in on defense tomorrow, and it's going to be a slow, methodical game, but at the

same time we've got to play our game and just speed them up because their pace is -- they're going to play at their pace, and we've just got to speed them up.

Q. Obviously every team that faces you guys comes in as the underdog and they've talked about how they use that underdog mentality as motivation. How much does hearing that over and over again motivate you guys?

SANIA FEAGIN: It just pushes us. Having No. 1, having a target on our back, we just come ready to play hard. It's expected anytime we play against any other team.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: We just come in the gym wanting to win and wanting to get better. We have learned a lot through our wins and knowing that we've got to do better each and every game because everyone is going to come for us.

So we come in with the mentality like hey, we've got to win because it's that part of the season where it's win or go home and I know we definitely don't want to go home.

Q. Obviously this is a very different team, not just in personnel, but even in the way you play this year, so much faster. I'm just wondering just the two experiences, a little bit larger role, but is there one you've preferred in terms of the way in which South Carolina plays?

SANIA FEAGIN: No, just come ready. I love this team. It's like our energy is young and stuff, but just play faster. I like playing fast.

Q. Te-Hina, I'm curious what has this first year at South Carolina meant to you? What has this journey been like, transferring halfway across the country, having to get acclimated to a new environment, a new team, and to be here at this point undefeated and one step away from getting back to the Final Four?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I'm so grateful and blessed to be able to play with South Carolina. It's been such a great journey so far. It's been meaning so much to me. I take a lot of pride in that, and the journey here has been so much fun. Everything has been happy and so genuine and a joy to play the game again.

It's just been so fun, and I'm so blessed to have the opportunity to do that. I can't stress that enough, and just how much I love this program. I love the team, and I love the coaches. I'm just really happy to come back for another year, and it's just been meaning so much to me and my family.



Q. Te-Hina, to jump off of that point, what is it about the South Carolina experience that makes it so encouraging, not just to come here, but to play here, to stay? Do you remember the moment you decided, all right -- you could be a first-round draft pick if you went out this year. What was that moment that you decided, I want to do this another year?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I mean, there was a lot of moments during the season. But the main thing is just the sisterhood that we have. It's just the genuine love. I know we sound like a broken record when we say the word love for this team, but it's just a genuine love for each other and wanting to go out there and compete with each other and just play for each other.

It's just a love of the game and a love of the team that we just want to keep winning and keep being there for each other, but it's just a genuine love to be around each other and the familyhood and the sisterhood.

You're just going to keep hearing that. It just is so much love that I can't even describe it.

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