

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

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Albany, New York, USA

Times Union Center

**South Carolina Gamecocks  
Coach Dawn Staley**

**Tessa Johnson**

**Ashlyn Watkins**

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

South Carolina 70, Oregon State 58

DAWN STALEY: Just want to say congratulations to Oregon State. Really tough basketball team. They're young. They're going to be back in this position again, and they're probably going to get over the hump. They're that good on both sides of the basketball.

We were extremely fortunate and lucky to get out of this region and on to the Final Four. Super proud of our team for the resilience and taking care competitive spirits to another level to secure us another berth to the Final Four.

**Q. Tessa, take me through kind of the thought process around the tough and-one finish, a critical moment in this one. And then, Ashlyn, you have a block percentage of 11, among the top in the country. Obviously Swatkins, the nickname. How much do you take pride in being a rim protector?**

TESSA JOHNSON: The thought process going through my head was my shots weren't falling as I wanted, so I needed to attack. They called the foul, so that's really it.

ASHLYN WATKINS: With me, I love playing defense. I love jumping, and I just like being active on the defensive end. I think that's what gets us started on the offensive end, good defense.

**Q. We're witnessing the growth of women's basketball taking off to new heights. Can you guys talk about how good it feels to be part of that history and**



**watching the evolution of women's basketball take off to where it is right now?**

ASHLYN WATKINS: It's special.

TESSA JOHNSON: I agree because when I was younger, like we were watching this and just being able to be here and being like role models for the younger generations, it's, what Ashlyn said, special.

ASHLYN WATKINS: I didn't realize that women's basketball just started being March Madness. I didn't realize that. Like a couple years ago. I didn't know that.

**Q. Tessa, could you talk about your growth process? Coach Staley has talked about this, your growth process this year and how that sort of got you ready for a big moment today leading the Gamecocks in an Elite 8 game.**

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, practices, they're -- I struggle a little bit in practices, but just being able to look past it and learn from my mistakes and having my teammates helping me and my coaches having me and just having a growth mindset. I think I'm struggling with my mindset a lot, so being able to grow with my mindset is the biggest piece.

**Q. Tessa, you guys I think in that third quarter were 2 for 15 from three and then you hit one and Raven hits one. Can you talk about what seeing those shots start to fall meant for this team to be able to put together that run that essentially won you the game late?**

TESSA JOHNSON: To my knowledge, I believe Raven hit it first, and me and Pao were saying she opened up the basket for us. I remember she passed it to me, and I just let it go, and then it brought momentum to the team.

**Q. Ashlyn, what did you tell Coach Staley after the Indiana game? You promised her something; what was it? How did you live up to it today?**

ASHLYN WATKINS: I told her that I was going to have more energy. I was going to be there for my team, and I feel like I lived up to that today.



I was just everywhere. I wanted to be everywhere. I wanted to get every rebound, and I almost did.

**Q. Tessa, as a freshman, talk about how special it is, that feeling of cutting down the nets and being able to have that celebration with your teammates out there.**

TESSA JOHNSON: It's very special because, like I said earlier, I was the little girl dreaming of being up there, and now I am.

Especially with my teammates, I love my team. I can't ask for a better team and coaches.

**Q. For both student-athletes, as we finish off women's history month for March, who are the inspirations in your life that made you into the woman you are today?**

TESSA JOHNSON: For me, I would say -- I don't even know if this makes sense, but God. I live through Christ. He lives through me. That's how I am who I am.

ASHLYN WATKINS: For me, I'd say my mother. She was always there for me. Like in AAU she took me to all my games, and she's my backbone. I owe it all to her.

**Q. Ashlyn, you talked about how much pleasure you take, how much joy you take in shot blocking. There's obviously a legacy of bigs here who have done it from Aliyah to A'ja. Do you have a goal of being at or above the level they were even as rim protectors?**

ASHLYN WATKINS: I don't really have a goal. I don't have a goal like that. I just play basketball. But like if it comes to that, then it's great to be on their level because they're great basketball players.

**Q. Coach, what does it mean to get this group to the Final Four, and what, if anything, did you learn last year that you might be able to apply to this year to get further?**

DAWN STALEY: Just proud. Just proud because we beat the odds. The odds said that we weren't -- we shouldn't make it back to the Final Four. Just proud of our team and for them believing in themselves. They created a certain level of chemistry and culture, and they stuck with it, and then they allowed us to coach them. They trusted us to coach them, even when it didn't feel good to them personally at different times of the season.

Then overall I just think that -- I think God has a funny way of dealing with people, and I'm one of his, and for us to lose the way we lost last year and for him to bring us to this

point today makes me believe a little bit deeper. The strength is my faith in who he is because -- I don't know what the Bible verse is, but I know that when you're at your worst and your weakest moments, He's at his best, and He started working on that the day that that buzzer sounded last year during this time.

I'm proud of our team, and I don't want to ever not give God the glory for giving us uncommon favor.

**Q. Obviously I was asking Ashlyn about it, but I'm curious your perspective about it. This is a program that's had so many shot blockers at an elite level. Purely from that perspective, especially on a day where you can see her flying around like she was today, do you think she has a chance to be the best shot blocker you've had at this program?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it starts with volleyball. A'ja played volleyball, Ashlyn played volleyball. We've got another one coming in, Joyce Edwards, plays volleyball. I think those two-, three-sport athletes always give us an opportunity to be great shot blockers.

Ash, I don't know if she came into South Carolina saying I want to be one of the best or the best, but when you put it out there in front of her and she understands what that means, she'll start goal setting.

She's got a chance because she can do -- she can guard on the perimeter. She can guard in the post. So there are more opportunities for her to block shots because of her athletic ability and her ability to play positions 1 through 5.

**Q. You've mentioned the Bible. Your students athletes wished everyone a happy Easter. I'm wondering if this win had any special meaning for you given that it came on Easter Sunday?**

DAWN STALEY: Easter Sunday is pretty cool, but we all know who leads -- who's the reason for all seasons, and we just don't celebrate on the victories. We don't. Last year I thanked God for even the loss because I don't want to be one-sided, and to give Him the glory when it is only befitting for wins.

But last year rocked me. It rocked me. It rocked me because we had a team full of players who did all the right things. All the right things. Gave us no issues for four years. They were COVID babies. They missed the NCAA Tournament their freshman year. They came back, went to the Final Four their sophomore years. We lost at a missed put-back that was devastating to Aliyah Boston, and then they come back and win a National Championship in 2022.

Then they carried the heavy load of trying to go back to back, and it didn't end that way. But they gave every single thing.

If you could have been around that particular group of young ladies, you'd want them to win. We don't know why, and we often try to ask God why. Why?

Today I stand here as our why. Doesn't make them feel any better about them not cementing their legacy even more, but I know they're happy proud of this group and they're happy proud of South Carolina, where they chose to come to school and create a legacy. We have the culture in our program where I'm sure if I go back and check the tweets, A'ja, Aliyah, Laeticia, all of them, Zia, all of them are probably tweeting how proud they are of our basketball team.

Easter is as significant as any other day, but He is risen.

**Q. I'm sure every group you coach has an impact on who you are as a person and as a coach but you've talked about the unique personality of this group. I'm curious how they've changed you as a coach?**

DAWN STALEY: This is probably the first time in my career that a team has more stamina in certain areas. Like much more stamina than I could discipline them for. So I've learned to not fight certain battles. Not core value battles, not the core principle of who we are and who I stand for, but just that their identity, they play loose. They play free. It's allowed them to kind of police themselves and to hold each other accountable.

So in one regard, I relinquish that. In the other regard, they're taking care of it. But it's just different. Different than I'm used to.

So I give into allowing them to be their silly selves. Like they're really silly. They talk a lot about nothing. But some of that talk is holding each other accountable. They talk to each other in some of the most unadulterated ways that we've got to close the door and just kind of give them their space. But they enjoy each other. That's who they are.

**Q. I saw you in Philly, and you talked about a woman of color having an opportunity. Your success at South Carolina do you think has catapulted more opportunities for women of color and men of color?**

DAWN STALEY: You know, every time -- I get a lot of requests to recommend people for jobs, and I'm O-for. I tell them that. You may want me to call on your behalf, but the people that I've called for, they don't get the job. I don't even think they get the interview. So I don't know if I'm the

route. Maybe I'm not the person that should be their mouthpiece when it comes to recommendations, but it's not going to prevent me from continuing to try to get them jobs.

I think our success at South Carolina will raise some eyebrows to give someone else of color an opportunity. It's just not like a direct path through me. Maybe I'm bad at convincing people to give somebody an opportunity.

**Q. Obviously you've been a great point guard and you've coached against a lot of great point guards and coached them yourself. I'm curious what you saw from Donovan Hunter today and what that matchup with her and Raven Johnson was like to coach and what that whole environment was like.**

DAWN STALEY: I think Donovan is going to be great. She's already great. For her to be a freshman and to get her team in a position of one step away from going to the Final Four means that her future is bright. I mean, the entire program of Oregon State's future is bright.

They took us all the way to the fourth quarter in a one or two-possession game, and it was catapulted by Donovan, her ability to manage their team and get people in the right places and to play off ball and to make us pay when we got two -- we collapsed too much on penetrations. She made us pay for that by knocking down threes.

I thought it was a good matchup between Raven and her. She put Raven -- she got Raven in foul trouble, which is really hard to do because we're used to Raven being on the floor, and when she's not on the floor, we're not as good of a basketball team just for what Raven brings to the table on both sides of the basketball.

**Q. You've led your fair share of teams to the Final Four, cut down your fair share of nets. Does that feeling change year to year, team to team, or does it largely stay the same?**

DAWN STALEY: No, each time we get an opportunity to knock down some nets to go to the Final Four is really special because you don't know when it's going to be the last time that you'll do it. More times than not, there are players on the team that didn't experience it.

We had, I don't know, six players on this team that didn't experience cutting down a net. I think we called them all out in the locker room just a while ago. Pao is one of them. I'm happy Pao gets a chance to get to the Final Four and display her talent on that level. Tessa, Tessa, MiLaysia, Sakima, Adhel -- is it's like four or five of them.

I want their experience to be as special as the very first

time that we've been able to cut down the nets to go to our first Final Four.

**Q. I was just wondering if you could speak on your relationship with Kamilla and her progression over the past few years. Obviously she won regional most outstanding player and now she's one of the best players in college basketball. Could you speak on your relationship with her a little bit?**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, she got that today. I don't know where I was.

**Q. Most outstanding in the region.**

DAWN STALEY: Who else was on the team, anybody else?

**Q. Raven.**

DAWN STALEY: Okay, good. I mean, Kamilla's maturation process has been just on an upward trajectory. She had to play behind a National Player of the Year, National Defensive Player of the Year for two out of the past three years, and sometimes that can put you in a position of playing a backseat. She did it quite nicely because she doesn't ruffle anybody's feathers. We've got to actually make her be who we need her to be and who she needs to be for us and for the next level.

I think at times she's fought that, and there's other times where she's embraced it, and that's just the journey, the process of being great and being dominant.

If it was all just smooth and easy, anybody could do it. We're able to push her buttons in ways in which produces growth.

It wasn't always just up. She would take one step forward, two steps back, and two steps forward and one step back. I think it's a good process for especially young post players because they take a little bit longer to get things going.

But she's had great coaches. I mean, Fred Chmiel, who ended up going to Bowling Green State University, and then Coach Boyer has been a rock in Kamilla's life on and off the court to the point where she trusts her. When you can have -- if it's not me, it's going to be somebody on her staff that really gets in the crevices of who they are, and Coach Boyer has been able to do that for us, to allow that growth to continue to happen.

**Q. You're back here in the Final Four. You're undefeated. You've done it with an entirely new starting lineup. I'm struck by how so much of the**

**attention is on the game here tomorrow night. It feels maybe from the outside like you've done this very quietly and a little bit under the radar, if that's the way you kind of feel about this. I'm just curious why you think that is.**

DAWN STALEY: I don't know, but I like it. (Laughter). I really do. Like go ahead, take the spotlight, put it somewhere else. Let this team continue to thrive in the space that they're given.

Hopefully at the end of the day, next week this time, I'm hoping that we give a lot of people a lot to talk about.

But it's like that. I mean, I'm looking forward to tomorrow night's game. Now that we've won, I'm going to sit back and I'm going to enjoy it like everybody else, like probably millions and millions of people are going to tune into that game. I'm going to be one of them. I don't have Nielsen ratings in my house, but you can count me in, to watch the game tomorrow night.

**Q. Your team has had a knack for going on runs anytime an opponent has gotten close and maybe gets hope. What allows you guys to do that, and if you're an opponent, how disheartening must that be to see you guys just going downhill like that?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, they had to do something to close the gap. Then you respond.

For this particular year, we've responded, and it produced wins. It's not always like that. But with this particular team, I mean, as young and inexperienced as we are at certain positions -- when I say that, it's everybody's -- Kamilla started a few games for us last year, Raven started maybe one or two games for us last year, and everybody else is a starter.

They're just trying to figure it out, and they want to play for each other. They want to not disappoint each other. They hold each other accountable. I mean, Ashlyn sits up here very mild-mannered and soft-spoken, but she's not. When it's time for us to lock up and defend, and when they went on their run in the second quarter, when they were getting those threes off and making them, she was saying things that I didn't have to say and utilize time in a time-out.

It is that. It is them being able to lock in and execute what we need them to execute, and when it's not executed perfectly, they figure out a way on their own to make some plays because a lot of times when you're making those runs, it isn't a coach saying this, this, this. It is players making plays. It's them giving an extra effort. You saw Ashlyn out there. She was everywhere. She was



everywhere today out there on the floor because she wanted to win, and her teammates followed her.

I just want to say I thought this region did an excellent job at hosting all the teams, the hotels, the gym was very accommodating to us -- I can only speak on us. So really appreciate it, and I hope if you make a bid for it again, you've got my vote. But again, people don't listen to me. (Laughter).

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