

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: NC State vs South Carolina

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Wes Moore

Aziaha James

Saniya Rivers

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



3:00 in the morning means a lot to us.

Q. Did you guys stop and pick the guys up on your way home on your charter? But really what I wanted to ask, Saniya, obviously you're playing your own team. Dawn Staley said the other day she still talks to you, talks to your family. Can you take us through why you decided to transfer and what NC State brought you? And how you think your game has developed?

SANIYA RIVERS: I won't speak too much on why I transferred, but just because we're trying to focus on the game this weekend. But she's a great person. Like you mentioned, we still talk to this day. She congratulates me on accomplishments. And I do the same thing. If it's her birthday, I wish her a happy birthday.

She's the type of person you want to have in your corner for future opportunities even if she can't be your coach or I can't be her player.

We're really excited about this match-up. We saw each other yesterday, hugged it out. First time I've seen her in two years. It's going to be a friendly battle.

Q. (Off microphone)

SANIYA RIVERS: It's developed a lot. He lets me have a pretty free game. I think that's another reason I came here. He just lets us play. He's developed my game. He makes sure that I've gotten my 3-pointer better, because at South Carolina I think I was like one or two for God knows how many. It's definitely improved. He makes sure I get my elbow up. It's helped a lot.

Q. Saniya, on that same line, do you talk with any of the Gamecocks players? And just from an Xs and Os standpoint, what do you see with their guard match-ups for tomorrow?

SANIYA RIVERS: I talked to them, a few briefly yesterday at the rock and roll fest. I talked to them a little bit.

But just the match-ups, their guards are good. Their guards are good all around, starters and on the bench. I

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the North Carolina State Wolfpack.

WES MOORE: Well, we're just really excited about being here. Cleveland rocks, right? So we feel kind of like the party crashers. I don't know that we got an invitation to this thing, but we're here. So it's exciting. Really proud of these young ladies and what they've done the last few weeks, especially.

We've gone through a juggernaut of really great teams to get here, and couldn't be prouder. Like I said, we're excited about -- we know we've got a big challenge ahead of us. But, hey, we're excited to have that opportunity.

Q. NC State became the 11th school to put women's and men's teams in the Final Four. What's it been like in Raleigh? Can you sense the excitement from the fan base?

SANIYA RIVERS: Raleigh has been rocking. Raleigh has been lit. Those are like our brothers. They're not just the men's basketball team. We support them. They support us.

Our fans have been there for us to return. They were out there 3:00 a.m. one night when we came back from Portland. It was really nice to have that support. They did the same thing for the men's when they got back. So it's been fun.

AZIAHA JAMES: The same thing. Hillsborough has been filled. Fans just running to the Belltower, lighting in red. It's been crowded. Like Saniya said, them waiting for us at

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think if we can limit just their outside ball -- they can really hit the 3 ball -- I think if we can limit that, and just with the post, if we can box them out, limit them all to one shot, I think a lot of their points come off of offensive rebounds. If we can slow that down a little bit, I think we'll be all right.

Q. Aziaha, you've been really shooting the ball well this whole tournament. How do you see your game in this Final Four against a team that plays great defense? Do you think you can continue your hot streak going forward?

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. But not just relying on that 3. Just allowing it to come to me. But I would just say just not relying on it and just still keep going, attacking downhill and still looking for my other teammates.

Q. Your coach kind of alluded to it earlier, but to get here, you beat higher seeds than you were, and you were the underdog with not given a huge chance to win. Do you feel like the team has taken on this underdog mentality? And has that helped you at all get to this point?

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. I think the team, we took on the underdog. Like Coach Moore said, it's good to be a party crasher and upset teams. I feel it gives us more confidence, you know, that people looked down on us and we can change something.

SANIYA RIVERS: We've been the underdogs all season, since the season started. Like she said, it gives us confidence, but I also feel like it gives us so much motivation, just motivation that we have something to prove. We played all season with a chip on our shoulders.

And it's the same thing now. We're the underdogs. Like Coach said we're the party crashers, and we're coming to crash the party.

Q. You guys only scored 51 points in the ACC championship game. And that seems kind of impossible considering how you've shot the ball since then. What changed offensively or what rhythm have you guys gotten in since then?

SANIYA RIVERS: That's a good one. I think we just know we have to score more in order to win these types of games. All teams are good at this point. Their games are going to be over 50. So as long as we score more than the other team, we win, right?

That's been a big part of our offense. She's averaging, like, 20 these past, like, five, six games. That's what we need from her. We're a very versatile, unselfish team. It

doesn't matter whose night it is.

If she's the hot hand we'll keep feeding her. I think there was a game we went to her, like, six plays in a row. She was just on a roll. So I think she's a big part of what we have offensively now.

Q. When we were in Raleigh, we were talking about you facing all the Tennessee teams. I think it was you, Aziaha, who said we'll face South Carolina now because it's Saniya. Where did that confidence come from? And when you said that did you really believe that? Did you know this was in the future?

AZIAHA JAMES: Potentially we knew it was going to come. We know how much this game feels, I mean, means to Saniya. We'll have her back out there and she'll have our back out there.

We definitely have the confidence. Just like you all said, being the underdog, that confidence really rooted us to make it here. We wanted to do it for Coach Moore.

Q. Saniya, you got to NC State the same time as River Baldwin and you've grown over these past couple of years. When you see her match up against an elite post player, like Kamilla Cardoso or Cameron Brink, how much confidence do you have in River?

SANIYA RIVERS: I have all the confidence in the world. River's been a post player all her life. She knows what to do. I don't know if she's ever played against Kamilla or someone with the skill of Kamilla. But I'm excited to see the match-up. I'm sure everybody is excited to see the match-up. I have all the confidence in the world.

Q. Saniya, just kind of one more in the vein of you starting your career at South Carolina, do you think you would have developed into the same player you are now had you not transferred?

SANIYA RIVERS: That's a good question. I'm not sure. I'm not sure if I'll ever know because, of course, I'm not there anymore. I learned a lot from Dawn as I was there. I learned a lot from the point guards that were there. Obviously Henny and Zia, they were older than me.

And just watching them, especially being the point guard that I am now, I will say that I did learn things from them because they were the leaders when I was there.

I feel like I have just developed my game here as far as my leadership role as well. So I'll never know. But maybe, maybe not. I don't know.

Q. Could you rate Coach's singing ability. We saw the clip going around. But just talk about how much fun this team seems to have and how does Coach kind of foster that environment and balance kind of when you need to be serious versus when you can be singing and making "Cleveland rocks" jokes?

SANIYA RIVERS: I'm going to say 11 out of 10 because I like my playing time right now. Can't say anything less.

But he's just a great guy on and off the court. He motivates us. He loves us. His favorite song is literally "My Girls," and he makes sure to sing it to us at least once every week.

We love him. We appreciate him. We did this for him as well. We're just having fun right now. I think he makes it easier for us when we're all having fun, especially when he's having fun.

When Coach Moore comes in waddling, it's like, are we going to have a good day or a bad day? But when he starts dancing, it's, like, ah, it's going to be a great day. It's going to be a great day of fun. We love him. We love him.

WES MOORE: I do that more often.

AZIAHA JAMES: I think Coach Moore just trusts us. He allows us to sing our songs, but then he knows, like, we know when to lock in. We know when to settle down and start to focus and maintain our focus on the game and stuff like that.

Q. What song would you like to hear him sing? Has he ever done any Beyoncé or Taylor Swift?

AZIAHA JAMES: It's definitely "My Girls." It's definitely "My Girls." Yeah, that's his top song. That's his top song.

SANIYA RIVERS: He claims his favorite is Beyoncé.

WES MOORE: She wrote a song about me, so that kind of makes it special. May have heard it, "Drunken Love." (Laughter).

We're both from Texas. So kind of connected there.

Q. You were talking a little bit about locking in. How are you balancing kind of experiencing Cleveland and the Final Four and this whole journey with kind of making sure you're really going to be focused and fully prepared for Friday night?

SANIYA RIVERS: I'm not going to lie. This is a lot of media and it's a lot of experience. I just woke up from a

nap in the locker room because I had a little bit of time just to lay my head down.

But it's been fun. But how do we balance it? I think, as I said, just making sure that we're locked in. I don't know. It's a lot. But I think we're really enjoying the ride.

We just picked out our gifts. That part was fun. And you balance it out with some basketball, you know, the practices. And we get to talk to you guys, and it's good conversation. So I think we're doing a pretty solid job balancing it.

AZIAHA JAMES: Like Saniya said, balancing it and going back to the hotel, and focusing on film and getting to bed early, and make sure we're eating and stuff like that.

Q. Saniya, you got a championship with a team you're going to play with. What would it mean for you to get another ring on the other finger? I ask you this -- (indiscernible) gotta keep it going.

SANIYA RIVERS: Keep it consistent. I would love to have two rings on my hand. That would be really nice. My mom keeps it in the case. She wants me to get another one. I might have to bring them both out if that happens -- when it happens.

Q. Aziaha, you played at a powerhouse in Princess Anne, won a state championship, a lot of games. How did your time at Princess Anne prepare you for your time in college? How does it feel to be representing the 757 during this great run y'all are on?

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely coming from high school, coming from another winning program, helping me up here and just staying humble as well. Coach Dozier is the same coach as me -- as Coach Moore. They stay on me all the time. And I love that type of thing, I love that type of energy. It keeps me going, keeps me focused.

But just to bring it back to the 75, it feels good. Just to have my brother looking over me as well, it feels good to bring it home for them.

Q. I'm going to resist the urge to ask for your review about Beyoncé's country album, but could you talk to us about Saniya, how you've seen her grow when she went into the portal, what did you like about her game and what did you think she could eventually become?

WES MOORE: Well, obviously she's from Wilmington, North Carolina, so I had an opportunity to see her play many times. So I knew how special she was, is.

But I have seen her grow a lot. I think really her and Aziaha both, if you want to go there, just have matured so much.

I think a year ago Saniya came in and we had a lot of veteran players, and she was probably hesitant to try to take on a leadership role and maybe even try to talk to her teammates much on the court. But now I think she realizes she's a leader for us, and we're counting on her.

And just to see her -- it's really what coaching is about. You see them come in as girls, high school girls. And then all of a sudden, at some point, you see them become confident women. So it's neat to see that process happen. And obviously it's made a big difference in our program the way her and Aziaha both have really grown up and matured this past year.

Q. There's a lot of attention on this Final Four. Seems like your team is loose and really enjoying the moment. How would you characterize their mentality going into this game?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I mean, I hope it's just what we've been doing. That's what I told them. That's what I've been telling them every step of the way. We're having so much fun, I don't want to see it end. That's what our message has been.

We go to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame last night. They had a section set up where they had a guitar player and maybe a drum player, whatever. And they would play whatever song you wanted.

They had mics for all of them. And they jumped all over it. And I enjoyed getting in there with a couple of songs.

But when we left, a couple of them were -- I mean, hate to say it about a young lady -- but perspiring heavily. Okay? I told some of them, I hadn't seen you do that in a practice. So they were using a lot of energy out there performing those songs.

But we're having fun. So I hope that doesn't change. They've all been big games, every step of the way, especially the two in Portland. Go all the way across the country and play two fine programs like Stanford and Texas and you fall behind to Stanford 10 at halftime. It would have been easy, you know, maybe to have some doubts. But haven't seen it yet. And sure as heck don't want to see it tomorrow.

Q. Obviously you've done a terrific job building up this program. You've had teams that maybe were more favored than this one to make it to this point. Have

you had a chance to reflect on or make sense why this team right now in this moment?

WES MOORE: When we won that Texas game to secure our berth here, the first thing I'm thinking of is Kay Yow, 34 years as the head coach, took the team to Final Four in '98. And then I thought about our team two years ago where -- it was a little bit different, we had a team where most of the players had been with us five years.

They had maybe come in, worked their way up. They weren't top -- most of them weren't even top 100 players. But they just worked hard and they loved each other and we just kept getting better and better, individually, team. And to fall that close, double overtime to go to the Final Four, I thought of them.

And then this group, unranked in the preseason, picked eighth in the ACC. But then when you beat UConn, I mean, it's a measuring stick. You can't help but look at that.

Then you go to the Virgin Islands, win three games, you beat a great Colorado team. Then you jump into ACC play and have some success. I think all that prepared us for this.

And we've had our best practices, probably, the last few weeks because, again, let's face it, it's kind of the end now, so you know, oh, gosh, we're not practicing another month; it's right now.

But I think the chemistry, the closeness is what's made this team special and made it an unbelievable ride for me. I'm just so blessed and thankful.

Q. It's been a 35-year journey to get here. How does it really feel? And also you've had success against -- your program has had success over all these teams that are in the Final Four. You beat Iowa last year. Connecticut this year. South Carolina, you were the last team to beat them at home.

WES MOORE: Still?

Q. Yeah. You were the last team to beat them. They haven't lost at home since you won. Moving forward, a lot of the attention is on the other teams, how do you feel about your chances here in Final Four?

WES MOORE: I mean, I can read the ticker. They're not worrying about hurting my feelings, I guess. Stanford and Texas, I think our chances of winning were 20-something percent. And now we're maybe in the teens, if that, the percentage, odds to win it.



I also saw the odds of us winning a national championship are below 1 percent. But, hey, I'm that "Dumb and Dumber" guy -- so you say there's a chance?

One game at a time, one game. We're going to have to play really well. We're going to have to have some things go our way. I don't have any doubt the Lord's been looking out over me these last couple of weeks. We've shot the ball well and we've got to do that. If you don't shoot the ball well this time of year, you're probably going home. We've got to shoot it well.

Obviously we've got to find a way, somehow -- we're not going to stop her -- but slow Cardoso down a bit and hopefully do a great job on the boards.

Yes, I'm excited. You can look at it one of two ways. Oh, my gosh -- I think it's the best team South Carolina's had. No doubt in my mind, because they can shoot it. When we beat them a couple of years ago, whatever, they had Aliyah Boston, great player, but we were able to maybe help a little bit here and there off of other people.

It's a little bit tougher now. They've got three or four kids that are shooting over 40 percent from 3. It's going to be a tough challenge. But I've gotten all the text messages about David and Goliath, okay. So praise the Lord. Amen.

Q. You mentioned Kay Yow. What did she mean to you and what do you think she would think of this run y'all are on?

WES MOORE: You know, just hard to describe what she means in the state of North Carolina. And it was more than basketball. And even now, in her passing, look at what she's doing. I mean, the Kay Yow Foundation is doing so much for cancer research and treatment and helping people.

I'm proud of that -- Kay Yow and Jim Valvano are NC State and they're both making an impact in this world even after their passing.

It was an unbelievable -- I wish I had time to tell the story how I ended up at NC State with her. That whole thing is a miracle. I was a D-III coach in Tennessee and how I got that job is crazy.

But she was such an unbelievable person. And that, of course, sometimes is hard to take because I know I'm not near the person she was. Very special in North Carolina. She's a legend. It's awesome to be here and follow in her -- it's her program.

Q. You guys scored, I believe, the most points against UConn this year in that November game. Don't know if you've had a chance to see them during this tournament run that they've had, but I'm just curious about what you think the differences are and the changes are in that team from the team that you guys saw when they had all their players, everybody at the beginning of the year?

WES MOORE: When we played them, they had Fudd. And I'll be honest with you, we played unbelievable that night. We were at home. Sold-out crowd like always.

It was just, I mean, Saniya Rivers scored 35, I believe, she's hitting shots from everywhere. But the whole team just played unbelievably well. That's what you have to do to beat a great team like that.

I think this is Geno's best coaching job, to think about all who he lost along the way and he's still now in the Final Four. So come on.

I had an opportunity to watch them. Obviously Paige Bueckers is really stepping up big. And to think her and Caitlin Clark here together, it's a great time for women's basketball, y'all. Just the entertainment value is making it really special, and I think you see the TV ratings going through the roofs.

I love watching it when I'm at home. I've got a computer watching film in front of me. And I've got that TV on watching everybody else. And it's a great time for our sport.

Q. You've mentioned the sort of the David and Goliath analogy. What do you feel is the stone in the sling for this team? What's the X factor that will give you all a shot?

WES MOORE: Good question. I think, first of all, we've got to take away the easy points for them. They're so good, you don't need to help them any.

So transition D, you've got to find a way to get back. And they can run. And make them, take away layups. Same thing, offensive boards. You've got to find them. And they're a great offensive rebounding team.

To be honest, we didn't do a good job against Texas in that area. We're going to have to have find a way to keep them off the glass and giving them easy buckets that way.

And we need to shoot the ball well. We need to hit some 3s, loosen that defense up a little and widen the defense out. The better you shoot the 3, the bigger those gaps get

in the defense. We need to do that.

We need to take care of the ball. We've been doing probably the best job of the season the last few games of taking care of the ball. But those possessions, we gotta have those shots to have a chance. Maybe that in a nutshell is what we're looking at.

Q. Did you grab an instrument at the Rock Hall, or did you just stick with the vocals?

WES MOORE: Not really. You know, when you've got a voice like this, you really want to stick with your strength, you know?

No, I cannot carry a tune in a bucket, but I love music. Just in the last couple of months, thanks to Stephanie (phonetic) helping me a little bit, I've seen Journey in Raleigh. I've seen the Eagles in Raleigh. I've seen the Doobie Brothers. So, yeah, I love it. It was a great deal. I was so excited about going to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Q. You mentioned the great state that the game is in right now, and there's such parity out there. That being said, how impressive is it that the Gamecocks are 38-0?

WES MOORE: Yeah, why did you have to say that outloud? Yeah, you know, again, that's what I'm saying, this is the best team she's had. We all know she's an unbelievable coach. And she's had great players.

And I shared with them yesterday, I'll tell you all now, when she was hired, I was coaching at UT Chattanooga, and I actually interviewed for the job as well.

We met at the Biltmore. Not sure if you're familiar with the Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina. That's where we did the interview met. I'm asking them, how do I get in the gate? Just tell them you're here to see South Carolina.

But can you believe they made that decision and went that direction? But it's worked out pretty good, I guess.

They're loaded. She's great. Like I said, but you can look at it two ways, oh, my gosh, why do we have to play them first game here? I look at it as that man, there's 356 teams that would give anything to have this opportunity. So let's load up that stone and let it rip.

Q. I'm curious how you've seen Zoe develop over the course of the season and navigate the intensity of this month as a freshman?

WES MOORE: We knew Zoe was going to be a great player for us, and she's still a freshman. Again, I don't know, to think about these kids were playing in a high school gym a year ago and now they're here in this venue and they're playing people that are fixin' to be playing in the WNBA here in a month. Okay.

I mean, they're playing against 24-year-old women. So it's amazing to me that they can even handle that. But Zoe is, again, a special player. She's kind of been a little X factor for us, because when we bring her in, that adds another person that can get downhill and create and make things happen. So, yeah, it's pretty fun to watch how she's grown as well.

Q. Obviously the men's program is in the Final Four as well. But they will have a much more tangible thing because the men's side has units. So both the college and the conference will get a lot of money. Do you think that's where the women's game needs to go now with the increased viewership and the new TV deal?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I would love to see it happen. I know on the men's side, it's the revenue that's brought in and all that makes it tangible that they can divide that money up. I would think we're doing pretty good. It matters now.

I think it would be great if our universities could benefit from the appearances and how deep you go in the tournament. I'd love to see it. But, again, that's way above my pay scale.

Q. Just wondering if you've had a chance to talk to Coach Keatts about what your two respective runs will do for the school?

WES MOORE: We haven't talked a ton about that. Probably night before last we were on the phone about midnight. It's awesome. What he's done is a miracle. He turned that thing around and now they're on such a roll. I could see them being out there in Arizona for a while.

But we've kind of talked -- it's funny because I have an NIL deal at a little place called Sammy's, a sports bar, and I was in there the other day at lunch before we flew out and he said, hey, you need to stick around. I've got like the New York Times or somebody coming in here to interview me because we've had people wrapped around the building trying to get in when you are playing or the men are playing.

I said, okay. He said, I guess since you're bringing us so much business, I guess I ought to let you eat free. Oh, you're already doing that. I said, yes, but let's make it a

lifetime agreement now. (Laughter) So I got a handshake on that. I got that going for me.

But no, everything's booming in Raleigh. Everybody's so excited. And at first you're thinking, oh, wow, Connecticut did it too.

You know what's neat, this is the first time ever that two schools have had both teams in the Final Four. So we'll share that with them. But, yeah, it's pretty awesome to see what he's done.

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