

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

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Kamilla Cardoso

Raven Johnson

Finals Postgame Media Conference



South Carolina - 87, Iowa - 75

THE MODERATOR: Good evening and welcome to the NCAA women's Final Four press conference. Joining us are the 2024 national champion South Carolina Gamecocks.

DAWN STALEY: Just really wanted to say congratulations to Iowa and Caitlin for making it back to the national championship game. Obviously they're a formidable opponent that took everything that we had to win the basketball game.

But just don't want to not utilize this opportunity to thank Caitlin for what she's done for women's basketball. Her shoulders were heavy and getting a lot of eyeballs on our game. And sometimes as a young person, it can be a bit much, but I thought she handled it with class. I hope that every step of the ladder of success that she goes, she's able to elevate whatever room she's in.

I'm super excited to share this moment with our team. They are incredible human beings and young people who trusted, believed and figured out a way to help each other, learn and grow, and ultimately become champions.

Q. Raven, Caitlin had the big start, 18 points in the first quarter. You got the defensive assignment primarily after that and really cooled her off. What was your mindset going into that matchup?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Don't let her score. I was ready for

the moment. And I take defense very hard, like I take it to heart.

I studied her moves, and I was ready. I had confidence this year. I was telling myself last year's not going to happen again.

Q. Following up on that, Raven, can you explain what this means to you after -- you know, you've talked so much about the entire last year and the work that you put in. This is where you wanted to be. And now to be here in this moment, what does that mean to you?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It means a lot to do it with this group of girls. If you guys would have seen us, just the stuff we went through in the summer and the hard work we put in, we deserve this honestly.

Coach, she gives us so much leeway. She let us be loose. She just let us be who we are. It's just so much stuff that we go through.

Credit to the Freshies. I gave my net to Aaliyah Boston when I was interviewing with her. It started with her. She gave this leadership role, and she instilled this leadership role last year. There's no better way you can learn than from her.

Q. Kamilla and Te-Hina, I'm curious, we talked about Raven's defense. Both her and Bree kind of gave different looks at Caitlin all game. From you guys' perspective, how much does that help when you're able to have two versatile defenders on her? I guess, how does that help you guys as well as the whole team?

KAMILLA CARDOSO: I think it's really important. I feel like they do a great job on defense. And just by seeing how hard they play makes us want to play defense harder.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I thought they had the hardest job tonight, but it was also team defense. It took a lot of effort to guard Caitlin. And she did her thing, and we did ours.

Just to have these elite defenders on our team, it makes

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me want to play defense. It makes me want to play for them even harder. It's just amazing when you have good defenders like them.

It's not only them, it's the whole team. So I'm just really proud of them for what they did tonight. They did awesome. They did a great job.

Q. To not just win the championship, but to be able to say you were able to accomplish a perfect season, what does that perfection going down in the history books mean to you?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It means a lot to make history, be one of the teams to make history, especially with a young group. You guys just don't know what this team goes through, what this team do. It's daycare, yeah, it is daycare. But at the same time, when we step on the court, we're ready to play.

When the ball goes up, we're ready to play. We have a winning mentality, and we're so competitive. Our practices are so hard, especially against the Highlighters. We have a competitive edge, and we want to win.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, it just means so much. We've come a long way. It's been a long journey. We've trusted each other so much over the season. We have so much confidence with each other, so much love. We're going to sound like a broken record, but it's love throughout this whole program, throughout this whole team.

We genuinely love to be with each other. We genuinely want to see everyone succeed. It's been a great journey, and to cap it off with a perfect season, it's just a blessing. And all glory to God for that.

Q. Kamilla, what does Dawn mean to you, what she is as a coach and a person, and what she's been able to do within the program and helping you individually?

KAMILLA CARDOSO: She means a lot to me. I feel like, since the first day I got to South Carolina, she's been working so hard to get me ready and prepared for moments like this. I'm just so thankful to have her as a coach. She's like an inspiration for me and a lot of young girls out there.

I'm just so thankful to have her as a coach. She's the best in the business, you already know.

Q. Your team had 48 points in the paint and 51 rebounds, 18 offensive. How were you able to dominate inside so well during the game?

KAMILLA CARDOSO: I think just trying to get the post-ups and my teammates finding me and giving me the ball, even though I didn't shoot really good tonight. I think just by -- we just move the ball really good, and they were able to find me while I was open.

Q. Kamilla, it's been less than 48 hours since you injured your knee. I'm just wondering how limited -- how much treatment did you have to get, and what did you have to do? Did it affect you at all today? It certainly doesn't look like it on the stat sheet.

KAMILLA CARDOSO: I got a lot of treatment between yesterday and today. But I don't think it really affected me today. I was just able to go out there and play. I wanted to play for this team, play for our coaches. And I just wanted to go out there and play today.

Q. Every player, every team is motivated by something different. I'm just curious, for all three of you, how much you were motivated by what happened last year against Iowa? And did you want to see them in the national championship game this year?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I did want to see them in the national championship this year because what happened last year. It was apology to my teammates, my coaches and myself. And I just feel like, like I said, it was a revenge tour. And there's no better way than to play them in the championship and beat them.

Q. Raven, talk a little bit about that last four minutes. I think it was 80-75, and then you guys didn't let them score the rest of the way. Talk about the defense the last, I think, 4:12. And also with so many people coming back, minus Kamilla, how good this team could be, not only now, but for the next couple of years.

RAVEN JOHNSON: This team, we're going to be good. Coach Staley, we have the best coach, what, in the country, in the nation, in the whole wide world? It's no telling what she's going to add to the pieces that's already here. I just say be on the lookout.

Q. Kamilla, it was just a month ago in the SEC Championship game that things got ugly, and that was just all over the news. Then you have been dominant throughout the NCAA Tournament. I wondered how did you shift your mindset, if you did? Then what was it like to just play so well in the two biggest games of the season over the weekend?

KAMILLA CARDOSO: It was amazing. I feel like I just wanted to get out there in this tournament and just play

really well for my teammates, for my coaches, and to win the championship. So I think that's what I did.

Q. What does this mean for you ladies' legacy? And what is it like playing for the GOAT?

RAVEN JOHNSON: The GOAT, you mean the Dawn Staley? It means a lot just to play -- just to learn from her. She's like a mom. I mean, I don't know, I go to her about everything. I could joke around with her. I could do anything, just anything. She's like a mom, like a home away from home. It's a home-away-from-home feeling.

There's no better way to have a coach like her and be so comfortable around her. And I take pride in what she do for us, on and off the court, not just basketball.

KAMILLA CARDOSO: I agree with Raven. I feel like, especially me, I'm international, and I don't have my family here. She's just like a family for me, a family away from home. And I'm just so thankful to have her as a coach (crying).

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Man, she's so important to have in people's lives. She's amazing. God has put her in my life, and she's impacted it so much, not only me, but my family.

She changes lives for the better. I wish you guys could experience that and just how much she's helped me as a player and as a woman.

And she's just amazing, man. It's a blessing. Just playing for her is so much fun. People just love playing for her. People would run through brick walls for her.

To be able to have a coach like that, it's unimaginable. We're all just really blessed to have someone like her in our corner. She just impacted our lives for the better.

Q. This is for either of you. You look at the stat sheet there, we have three starters up on the stage, but it's 37-0 advantage in bench points in a national championship game. Can you just kind of break down that kind of impact, what your teammates were able to do in that department?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Man, they're our difference maker. This whole season, we've depended on them so much, they're our depth. They've done so much for this team. A lot of people sleep on them.

But they could start on any team in this country, but they decided to sacrifice that and play for this team and win a national championship, which we did today.

Big shout out to them. They did their big thing today on such a big stage. And I'm really proud of them. Their confidence has grown so much throughout this season. I'm just really proud of them for performing how they did today and helping us get this dub.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Going off what Te-Hina said, I'm going to give Tessa Johnson her flowers. When you talk about a freshman, it's just the stuff that she does. She's always ready for the moments. When her number is called, she's always ready. Every shot she puts up, it goes in. Just what Tessa does.

And on the defensive end, she takes pride in defense. If you talk to her, she's like a sponge. She's gets in the gym, she works on her shot every day. She wants to learn. She wants to grow.

When you're talking about freshmen, Tessa Johnson's name should definitely be in the conversation.

Q. Tessa Johnson scored a career high in the national championship game. She's a freshman. I don't know how old she is, I assume 18 or 19 years old. Raven, you just talked about it. Te-Hina, Kamilla, if you could talk about Tessa's performance.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Tessa was due for a breakout game. What to do better than on a national stage? She's trusted her process here. She's trusted her journey. And for her to do that on such a big stage, I'm so proud of her. Her confidence has grown so much.

I'm just really excited for her future. She's going to be a great Gamecock. She's got a bright future ahead of her. But she's just got to keep trusting the process and being who she is. She's just an amazing little girl.

KAMILLA CARDOSO: Yeah, I agree with that. I'm just so proud of Tessa. She's been working so hard since the beginning of this season. I'm so happy for her because she went out there and she did a big one. And I know this is going to boost her confidence a lot.

She's just doing a great job. She always works so hard for moments like this, and I'm so proud of her.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Congratulations on a tremendous season.

Q. Dawn, it felt like this championship was more emotional for you than the other two. Early in the game, you looked really emotional. And then at the end, you obviously broke down when they presented you with the trophy. Was it more emotional? If so,

why?

DAWN STALEY: Well, it was emotional for me because of how it ended last year. I'll leave that there.

And I was emotional at the beginning of the game because I didn't want what happened last year to happen this year. So I was handling things in real time, not afterwards.

I'm going to move to handling things in real time and not having to wait until there's an ending that shouldn't be. I was like that throughout the entire season, but for this one I wasn't going to allow what I felt happened to us last year to happen this year.

So I had a little bit of PTSD, and I addressed it in real time.

I mean, it's heavy, it's heavy. You carry the burden of every single one of your players, all the coaches and staff members that put so much into our team. And it's a heavy load to be undefeated, to finish the job.

And you get emotional because you just want that for them, and you're happy that you're able to -- because only one team wins the national championship. And when you win a national championship, there's more trust that's built that you can take into the summer workouts and the postseason workouts and in the fall and into another season.

There are so many conversations you have with parents, with any significant person in our players' lives, that the rigors of the season, you just have to face that music with them. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it's challenging. Sometimes it's just a really hard conversation.

Then once you win, this is the reason why. It builds trust amongst everybody that's involved in our players' lives.

And I'm just super happy for our staff. They work really hard. They are incredible basketball -- like, I think they're savants. I think they are always looking for ways in which to get our players better in a way that they can handle it, not in the way we see it, because the way we see it is probably -- the way we would handle it would be difficult for them to actually learn and apply and execute in a basketball sense.

So we're able to just kind of speak their vernacular and them actually deliver. So all of that makes it emotional for me.

Q. You said last Sunday when we were in Albany you were okay with no one really talking about you guys in other stories. You'd wait until this Sunday to talk

about it, hopefully with the championship. You got the 10th undefeated team in the history of the game. You're the fifth coach to win three titles or more. You've won two out of the last three. What does it mean to this program for you to have done all you guys have accomplished this year with a perfect team and the last couple years with the dynasty you've built in South Carolina?

DAWN STALEY: Well, it means that we have quietly done things, in my opinion, the right way. We find the right pieces to help us. We really do things the right way. We're very disciplined in how we approach basketball.

I am one that, I'm forever indebted to basketball, so I'm always going to take care of it. I'm always going to make sure that our players are respectful. I'm always going to make sure that they know the history of our game. I want to make sure they are always respectful to our opponents.

And when you do it that way, in return, you have success. You have success in the wins column and very little disappointment in the loss column.

I don't think that's talked about enough, what we've been able to do, and I don't know why. And I really don't care why. We're going to keep doing what we're doing the right way, whether we are the popular or unpopular successful programs in the country. We're going to keep doing it that way.

Q. Someone mentioned earlier the depth, 37-0 bench points. Obviously you hope at the beginning of the season, but what's it like seeing the way you built this team, this roster panning out in the way that you'd hoped and having success in that way?

DAWN STALEY: To have a roster that goes nine, 10 deep is -- it's a privilege, it really is. But it has to be developed slowly and the right way. Like, there's a lot of trust that has to be built because there's some games that some of them won't play a whole lot, especially the people that's coming off the bench.

Chloe Kitts went up and down and all around, and then finally she settled in today to have a really good game. But she had to come off the bench at times because of -- not what she wasn't doing, but it was more about what somebody was doing and doing well. And that can shake your confidence.

But at the same time, you have to let her know the way you build trust in our coaching staff, it's the same way your competitor is building trust.



I think MiLaysia Fulwiley has been very patient with us to be able to have a household name coming off the bench, playing maybe, probably less than 20 minutes a game, where she could have gone anywhere else in the country and they'd have given her the ball time and time again.

But winning a national championship will allow us and that relationship to continue to grow because I know she really wanted this.

And I would imagine that, come as early as next year, she's going to want to be a starter, she's going to want to play more minutes, she's going to want a lot of different things because she got the big one. So now she'll maybe want to concentrate on some individual awards. And I appreciate her sacrifice.

So it's everybody. It's just Sania Feagin who, she's a junior, and she's probably started less than 10 times, but she came up crucial this game, like really.

I know she's probably wanted to play a lot more throughout the season. But I hold her to her standard, I hold her to her personal and individual standard to sometimes that equates to six minutes, or five minutes or less.

And it doesn't feel good, but in order for us to do what we do today means she's got to meet her standard. And we don't sacrifice that.

So it's built through trusting the process. It's built through really high-level communication, some that they may not like all the time, but it's truth. We also want them to talk to us about what they're feeling and seeing so we can understand them and how they operate in that space. So we don't want to mess anything up, but we also want to give them an opportunity to tell us what they're thinking and how they're processing information or if we're giving them the right information.

That's a long winded answer. Sorry.

Q. You made a point after the game of recognizing Caitlin Clark for helping to elevate the game. South Carolina was also a part of that, too, as well as other clubs. And I wonder if not in this moment, later, if you will look back and take particular pride in saying that you all were part of this transformation that we all are talking about today?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I know we do our part. I know we do our part. I know we do our part in making sure we try to, as much as possible, shout it to the top of our lungs what our game is all about, and all of the story lines and all the talent and all the coaches and all the talent that's

actually telling the stories.

I have to continue to shout out Elle Duncan and Draya Carter and Chiney and Leah and Carolyn Peck, they've done a tremendous job. We have to find a way for them to tell our stories during the off-season because you have to continue to build on what we've captured.

Do I think South Carolina is a part of it? Yeah, we're a part of it. I don't know what part, but you can see the numbers that, when Caitlin plays in a game, you see the numbers. They're real numbers, and a lot of people like to deal in those real numbers.

I hope we were able to attract some more people by the amount of eyeballs that probably watched our game just because Caitlin was appearing in it.

Q. What does it mean?

DAWN STALEY: What does it mean to me? I just want our game to grow. I don't care if it's us. I don't care if it's Caitlin. I don't care if it's JuJu or Hannah. I just want our game to grow, no matter who it is.

Because there's a lot of people that are out there growing our game, a lot of programs out there growing our game. We need to continue to uplift them as well as we take our game to the next level.

Q. How critical was Raven's defense on Caitlin, especially the way Caitlin came out shooting the ball?

DAWN STALEY: For Raven, I think it was psychologically helpful to be able to play Iowa and Caitlin, to just release. As a player, you want to release certain things that have held you captive. And I do think the waving off in the Final Four last year held her captive, to where usually you just quietly do things and go about your business. Raven's got the bullhorn saying this is revenge tour, this is this, this is that.

Then for her to actually lock in and play Caitlin the way we needed her to play her -- we knew she was going to get her points. We wanted her to get her points in an inefficient way. Like I look at the stat sheet, it's beautiful. It's like, if she scores -- if she's shooting 50 percent, we lose the basketball game.

So I think it's pretty cool that she was able to just kind of check off a goal and move forward. And hopefully there will be another test to challenge her in a way that will continue to elevate her.

Q. As you've built this program, this dynasty, what do



you look for in a player? Beyond just basketball, is there a single thing, a trait that you look for where you say, that's what I want in a South Carolina player?

DAWN STALEY: Aside from their talent, a prerequisite of us actually recruiting a young lady is their relationship with their parents because if they respect their parents, they're going to respect us. If they don't respect their parents, we don't have a shot. So that's what we look at a lot.

Fortunately, we have some really great parents who are -- they're in their daughter's lives every single day, so they're in our lives every single day. And we don't mind because all of us want the same thing. We want them to be incredibly successful. I'm fortunate as a coach to have that relationship with our parents.

Q. Last 4:13 of the game, they cut it to five, and they don't score again. For a coach who preaches toughness and those kinds of things, how satisfying is it to close a game with that defense?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's incredibly satisfying. You have a team full of players who probably felt the lead dwindle to a point where someone like Caitlin, like a five-point lead versus Iowa is nothing. Like, they don't flinch when it comes to getting the lead into a -- come on, you're all writers, help me out -- that's dwindled to the point that it's a one- or two-possession game.

When there was a timeout called, you could hear all of the players, all of them, just talk about how we needed to have stops. And it wasn't just the players that were in the game; it was the players that were sitting on the bench.

Hey, we can't give up a 3. Hey, you've got to show -- I hear Ashlyn Watkins tell Chloe Kitts, way to stunt. Like, way to stunt, Chloe.

And Ashlyn could have been really upset because she didn't get the minutes she usually gets because of foul trouble, but they're that locked in.

When you have -- your peers are saying things to you that want you to be great, I mean, it's half the battle for us. Like we don't have to say those things, although we reiterate what they're saying. It's pretty cool when they can hold each other accountable, and they can also best each other with encouragement.

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