

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

Thursday, April 2, 2026

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Mortgage Matchup Center

## South Carolina Gamecocks

## Coach Dawn Staley

## Ta'Niya Latson

## Raven Johnson

### Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined by South Carolina.

At this time we're going to open it up for questions for our student-athletes.

**Q. Ta'Niya, Raven, I'm sure you've scouted this. How tough of a matchup is this to try to shut down UConn?**

TA'NIYA LATSON: It's a tough matchup. They're undefeated. We have to come in with the right mindset and follow the game plan, watch a lot of film, pay attention to our scout, do what we have to do.

**Q. Raven, what stands out to you about how both of these teams have evolved from this matchup last year? What stands out in your mind when you look back at that game?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I just remember getting beat by 20, honestly. We got new players in. This is their first time experiencing the Final Four. I think Coach Staley, the other coaches, are doing a good job of keeping the main thing the main thing and keeping us ready when the moment is here.

**Q. Ta'Niya, you talked about when coming to South Carolina some different ways that you feel you could refine your skills. Is there one you think you have refined the most?**

TA'NIYA LATSON: I would probably say my play-making abilities. Just seeing the second line of defense, seeing the second and third option, not just seeing one option. Probably been a little bit more patient on offense, seeing

the whole floor.

That was something I really wanted to work on coming into, going into South Carolina. Then going into the league next year, that's something I'm going to really need. So yeah.

**Q. Raven, as a Final Four veteran, is there anything you tell your teammates who are new to this, experience you've had, things to not do?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, the lights are bright here. I just say be yourself. When your number's called, be ready. I say the room for marginal error is very small. I think it start in practice. Bring your practice habits to the game and you'll be good.

**Q. Ta'Niya, I think you've said one of the reasons why you came to South Carolina is to play in big games like this. How gratifying is it, how does it feel to be on this stage?**

TA'NIYA LATSON: I'm just blessed. Like you said, this is something I came here for, to play in big games, big moments like this. Reaching the Final Four, it's my first time. Obviously I'm a little starstruck.

I'm ready to go out there and compete. This is what I came here for. My mindset is already on playing on Friday. Going into it like another game.

Yeah, like I said, just being ready to compete.

**Q. What have you seen from Joyce Edwards, how she has been emerging from last year and this year?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I tell Joyce every day that she's elite. Her ability to play make, to defend, she takes this team to another -- she takes us here. Honestly. She can do everything. She can rebound. She's also a leader, uses her voice a lot. She talks to me. She's smart on and off the court. I think her intelligence when it comes to the game of basketball is really amazing. She sees plays before it even happens.

**Q. Ta'Niya, this is your first Final Four. You came here**

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
sports

**to compete and to win. How do you not to allow those bright lights to get to you?**

TA'NIYA LATSON: Just being mature. Not letting it get too much in my head, not getting too much in my head. Obviously it's a big moment. It's my first, like I said, Final Four. I'm not going into it thinking it like that. I have to go into it as a leader, as a senior, act like I've been here before, play my game, play South Carolina basketball, bring what I bring to the team.

**Q. Ta'Niya and Raven, I feel like you don't get to this moment without Coach Staley pouring into you. Is there something she said to you during the season that helped you stay focused?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: When we took losses throughout the season, I think practices, they shifted. They were hard. She was on our butts. She was a different person.

I think that made us come closer. That made us realize that people here, this is their first time ever experiencing things like this. We had to remind them that our standard here is very high. We had to remind them in practice, good habits are contagious. When you have good habits, they carry on into the game.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Like Raven said, she get in our butts a lot, but she also instills confidence in us. That allows us to be the best player that we can be on and off the court. She reassures us a lot. Having a lot of conversations with her. She has her own relationship with each and every one of us. I think that's what makes her so special. Her way to connect with us allows us to flourish as players.

**Q. Raven, it's been great watching you over the past four years, your game transformed. What makes this team special? What makes this Final Four special for you?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: We went through a lot this season. It started before the season even happened. We had people that got injured, Chloe Kitts. We didn't know if Ashlyn was going to come back. But I think we just stayed together. When people's numbers were called, they were ready for the moment.

We didn't let nobody into our circle, no matter if it was haters, no matter if it was people on our side, we leaned on each other. Even through the bad and the good times. Ta'Niya had times where she had to sit out games, but she always uplifted others, like freshmen, like Gotti, Ayla. It's little things like that that goes a long way. It means a lot when you make it to the Final Four with these type of women.

**Q. Dawn, you have a 35-year history going up against Geno, from when you were a player, now facing him again. How has facing his teams made you evolve as a coach? How do you feel like he's evolved as a coach facing you?**

THE MODERATOR: We're going to hold that question. We're taking questions for the student-athletes at this time.

**Q. Raven, what are you most proud of during your career? Obviously you've been in the Final Four your whole career. What are you most proud of that maybe people don't know?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I went through a lot throughout my college career. I think I stayed true to who I was. I trusted the process. When things got hard, there were times you want to quit or you want to give up on yourself. You have people like her and like Coach Staley, my teammates, and the resources she have provide for us, I leaned on them more than I usually thought I would have. I leaned on them, and they helped me overcome hard times.

You got family. Family means a lot to me. I think they helped me get over hard times. I just stayed true to myself. When my time was here, I mean, I met the standards and I got in the gym. You got to live in the gym if you want the results that you want, so...

**Q. Raven, when you were announced the most outstanding player in the Sacramento region, you had a reaction to the announcement. What did you feel in that moment?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I was just playing with confetti. I wasn't really thinking about the most outstanding player. I heard them say people's names, but I didn't think they were going to say my name, which I didn't care for it. But when they said my name, I'm like, What, me? I earned this?

It honestly shocked me. In my head I was thinking this just don't go to me, it go to my teammates because I wouldn't be here without them. There's moments where they uplifted me. I was honestly thinking Joyce Edwards, that's what I was really thinking, she deserved it. But I told the freshman Gotti that the award belongs to her, what she did in the last game, it was phenomenal as a freshman, yeah.

**Q. Raven, it was the first time this season in a while that South Carolina and UConn hadn't played in the regular season. Does this make this game any different?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: No. I think we take one game at a time. It doesn't matter if you played them throughout the season, Final Four, championship, first game. They're still going to be UConn. We're still going to be South Carolina.

When we do play them, just got to be ready, yeah.

DAWN STALEY: Good question.

**Q. Raven, this team has had trouble last year with this UConn squad. Do you think there's a chip on your shoulder to prove people that you're capable of beating them?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: No, I wouldn't say a chip on our shoulders. It's a whole new team. There are players that went through that. I think it probably motivates them to come back and try to beat them.

I wouldn't say chip on the shoulder. We have one goal, that's to get to the national championship. They're in our way of getting to the national championship. I think that's how we're thinking of it.

It won't matter if they were UConn, if they were Benedict. It don't matter. They're in our way, yeah (smiling).

**Q. Raven, when Aliyah Boston played her last game, from the podium she talked about this is Raven's team now. How have you been able to take possession of that leadership, whether you have a succession plan in mind for the next team?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: When she said that, I didn't think of me being a leader because I'm such a goofy person. I think I lead in a different way than the usual leaders that came through here. I'm goofy. I honestly try to make others feel comfortable with who they are. I'm definitely comfortable with who I am. I'm not changing for anybody. If you don't like it, you just don't like it.

My teammates respect me. I'm learning that they listen to me even when I don't think they're listening to me. It can be funny. I can say some funny things. They're listening.

I'm learning how to say some things when it's meant to be said, say some things when it's not meant to be said. I honestly say the things when it's not meant to be said, so...

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you so much.

At this time we'll open it up for questions for Coach.

**Q. Dawn, since 1991, you faced UConn as a player, and also as a coach. How do you feel that has helped**

**you evolve as a coach facing Geno? How do you feel like his teams have evolved facing yours?**

DAWN STALEY: I'll say that, I mean, UConn has been the standard in women's basketball for a very long time. Everyone has to measure up to their standard.

I think they allow us something to reach for. When you have a traditionally rich program like that, I think it helps us all grow. It helps us all try to game plan and figure out ways to just measure ourselves up to them and then possibly beat them. To be able to do that over a period of time, it's almost impossible.

It's incredible the standard that they have had for the past 40, 35 years.

**Q. Dawn, you talked about what's required for being a point guard for you. When it comes to Raven, early on where did she struggle to meet your expectations? Maybe now, how has she changed or elevated those standards you have?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, Raven was just really, and still is, un-serious, right? When it's time to elevate in regards to winning, she takes on this just, I mean, like narrow-mindedness of only seeing things that will help winning.

Like she said, she will say it. I mean, she did it, I watched her from afar, take each and every player. I think I said this in Sacramento, Joyce was shooting on the rims. They seemed tight. She had a negative comment about the rims.

Raven is like, she tapped her. That's what Raven does. Tilted her head. She was like, The rims are great. You got to think positive, just say positive things about it.

It was a very small interaction, I was on the sideline, I watched it.

Then one of our staff members overheard her just have a conversation with one of our players. She just verbatim, Raven, player; Raven, player; their reactions.

Raven just asked her if she was ready.

She said, Uhm-hmm.

This is how it was written, texted to me.

Raven said, You didn't look like it.

She said, We need you.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

The player said, Okay.

It is those type of instances where she probably would have never said that years ago. She would not have said it. But just probably in the past two Final Fours, you see more and more. I see more and more of that this particular Final Four because, one, they're younger, they don't know. They need her guidance. She's only going by her winning compass. She's going to point them in the right direction.

**Q. Usually as coaches, you want an extension of yourself on the court. Raven playing the point guard position, what things do you not worry about?**

DAWN STALEY: I'm going to say this. I don't worry about winning 'cause Raven is a winner. The play may be sketchy at times. Play may be in the groove, right? I don't worry about winning.

Her winning percentage with our program is pretty darn high. I mean, it's 90s, over 90%. I don't worry about winning. It's a comfort in knowing that Raven's on our team, and she gives us a really good chance of winning every time we step on the floor.

**Q. There's been a moving story where you got involved or were involved, the Lauren Betts story where she talked about what you did to help her. What prompted you to do it, how you found out, what said to her? What did she say about how you did help her?**

DAWN STALEY: I found out on social media like everyone else. We recruited her. Her phone number was still in my phone. The contact was in my phone.

I mean, it's human nature. You don't want young kids to have to go through some things, such dark times that she went through. Sometimes you just need to know that you're supported.

It was nothing more than reaching out to support.

**Q. At the Olympics there was this competitor, Chloe Kim, who was in first place. There was a Korean competitor who fell. Kim went to her and said, You can do it. The Korean ended up beating Chloe Kim. She was elated. Talk about the camaraderie amongst athletes? You were a coach, she's an athlete. It goes beyond wanting your side to win.**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I just think when you are a competitor, obviously you want to win, but there's always a human element to what you're doing. I'm always looking out for the greater good of our sport 'cause our sport has

been held down for so long that I do think the people that's within our sport have to have a healthy balance of winning and knowing when it's great for the game.

We had that 2021 when we were double-digits in the fourth quarter against Kentucky. You know, we didn't win the game. But I thought it was great for Kentucky. Like, it was pretty good game. They did what they needed to do. They executed a late game play, beat us. Did we want to win? Yeah, surely we wanted to win. But when you look at the whole grand scheme of things, it was a heck of a tournament for them, a heck of a win for them.

When you have perspective like that, when you can look beyond self and know that it's good for the game, you can be okay with it.

**Q. Having prior experience in the Final Four is always an asset. For players like Ta'Niya, is there anything helpful you can say or do that can help them get up to speed on that?**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, that's hard. I think the language Raven was speaking, we've always said to bring your practice habits to the game. There will probably be some adrenaline flowing real high for Ta'Niya, some of the other players that haven't been in the situation.

But when the game settles down, that's when your habits will actually come to fruition. There will be some highs, right, at the beginning. Then, you know, whether you get a bucket, whether you turn a ball over, it will jolt you into being present, where you are. Hopefully those habits start taking over and we play like we played all season long.

**Q. Obviously all four teams here have had a lot of lopsided wins the past couple weeks. This weekend that probably won't be the case. How do you stay prepared for clutch moments against good teams? Is that something you can practice, or is that something you just have to do when you get there?**

DAWN STALEY: No, I mean, you have to practice. There's certain things that you want, end-of-game situations, and you work those. You work more special situations. We need a two, we need a three. We're advancing the ball. We're going to take it out on I think Sacramento, we were preparing for end-of-game situations.

We like to take the ball out on the left side -- actually on the right side, sorry. Sacramento, our bench was on the right side, so we actually had to practice the other side, the side on which we can play from our dominant hands.

You do have to really practice that. One of our coaches really pointed that out to us, which I wasn't really thinking about. During that practice, she was like, We may need to practice taking it out on the other side because that's our norm.

**Q. With six consecutive Final Four appearances, how do you sustain that much greatness in a time with so much turnover with stuff like NIL?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's really total commitment to our program from our players. We have a staff that has been together for a long time. Like, we don't have very much staff turnover.

The core group of people and the core values that we bring into each season, every year, is what sustains us. Like, we don't necessarily going into the season saying, We want to...

Obviously the big goal is to win the national championship. That doesn't really drive us every day. What drives us every day is our habits. It's a driving force. What you work on is who you're going to be. When game day comes, if you didn't have a good week of practice, it's probably going to show (smiling). You can't be mad at it because this is what it is.

It's not going to magically happen. Oftentimes you just have subpar preparation that magically things are not going to look like your preparation. That's not. That's uncommon. Sometimes people do have a little bit of uncommon favor. Wrote a book about it (smiling).

That's just it. It's about habits.

**Q. Six consecutive Final Fours. Out of all Final Four appearances, you have never played in the state of Arizona. What is it like to be in a new environment, new stadium for a Final Four? Talk about some of the differences maybe.**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I think it's cool to go into different places. The cities that we've won a national championship are etched in my heart: Dallas, Minnesota and - heck - Cleveland. Damn. Right (smiling)? That was the undefeated one I forgot about. Damn!

It's pretty cool. I always try to test to see, like, you're hosting the women's basketball, the biggest event of our season, are the natives tuned into what's really happening? Are they loving up on women's basketball? What the excitement level is, not just in the game, because that's normal, but what is it on the streets? What are they saying? We're not in the city right now. We don't know the

buzz. We're 20 minutes outside the city.

But when we come in here, have a glimpse of people walking on the sidewalks, it seems like there's a pretty good buzz around celebrating the last weekend of our season. That's a pretty good thing when we're welcomed to especially a city we haven't played on at this level.

**Q. You have called Agot Makeer your secret weapon, your X factor. How do you make sure you sustain the production from her, and she's in UConn's game plan?**

DAWN STALEY: She has to be. I think she was in people's game plan no matter the performances she had in this tournament. Everyone knows she's incredibly gifted and talented. Her impact on both sides of the ball potentially is there. You have to prep for her.

For us, Gotti thinks highly of herself and her talents, which she should. I think that is the thing that propelled her to play like she's playing, is she thinks very highly of herself.

I think she's truly competitive, especially when there's somebody on the other side that's in her class that she wants to prove that she is in an elite class.

So for us, it's just continuing bringing our practice habits to the game. That's all we have to do in order for us to survive and advance in this tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports