

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

Friday, April 3, 2026

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Mortgage Matchup Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Ta'Niya Latson

Agot Makeer

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference



South Carolina 62, UConn 48

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by South Carolina. We will begin with questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Ta'Niya, 11 rebounds tonight. How does that happen? Why was that a primary focus of your attack tonight?

TA'NIYA LATSON: I knew I had to impact the game in any way I could. I wanted this win. Whether that was rebounding, scoring, assisting, I was going to do what I had to do.

The balls were coming my way, so I had to grab 'em and snag 'em.

Q. Ta'Niya, it felt like you played a big role in keeping the team together in the second quarter when Raven goes out. How were you able to help the team keep its composure?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yeah, I mean, it started on the defensive end. We had to get stops. We knew Raven was out there. She couldn't really run the show, but we had to have her back. Keep it as close as possible till we got her back. I think we just stayed closer during those times.

We stayed together and we fought until Raven got back.

Q. Being able to now compete for a national championship, be able to hopefully cut down the nets, what will it mean to you to be in this game, have this journey throughout the season?

TA'NIYA LATSON: It means a lot. This is why I came to South Carolina. It was a personal sacrifice that I had to make. I mean, I know a lot of people don't get that, they don't understand my why. I did. This is my why. This is why I came to South Carolina.

I'm just extremely blessed, blessed to have the teammates that I have, the coaches I have. We got one more, so I'm excited.

AGOT MAKEER: I mean, I think we're really excited. We both haven't been here before. I think we're going to take advantage of the opportunity and come ready on Sunday.

Q. How impactful Joyce Edwards has been on both ends of the court?

AGOT MAKEER: I mean, Joyce is a winner. She's going to do whatever we need. Tonight was rebounding. That was the emphasis for our bigs, we had to crash the boards. I wanted to join the party, too. That was cool. She's always going to impact the game. She's a winner. So she can get it done.

Q. It's funny because I'm looking at the stats, your efficiency is there. Would you call it comfort? What is your level of comfortability and confidence?

AGOT MAKEER: I mean, I'm not really thinking about it as if it's the tournament. It's basketball at the end of the day. It's the best basketball in the country. Tonight I was just focused on doing what I've been doing all tournament: just staying levelheaded. Obviously I'm going to miss shots. Sometimes I'm going to turn the ball over. But just staying steady on the defensive end, and then doing whatever I can on the offensive end.

Q. Can you share or take me through the mindset of going into halftime, what was the mood in the locker room? How confident, composed you all came out to start the second half?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Coach was pretty mad going into the half (laughter). She was yelling, Meet the moment, meet



the moment. We couldn't be scared to play on this stage, especially against UConn. They were undefeated.

But we had to keep fighting. We were obviously down by two points and we were playing into their hands. In the locker room we talked about staying together, playing our game, getting defensive stops. I feel like we did that.

AGOT MAKEER: I feel like we didn't play our best in the first half. I think we were excited going into the second half. Having Madina come and have some big-time buckets, that was going for her, good for our team. They went small. I got put in the game. I don't know. We just kept going.

Q. Your defense basically took them out of the game in the second half. What was the focus there? How do you feel that worked?

TA'NIYA LATSON: We just played great team defense. I mean, we stuck to the scout report. I mean, Coach Mary did a good job in telling us what we needed to do.

I feel like we all watched film. We were really locked in during shootarounds. We knew their tendencies, what they liked. I think we executed it really, really well.

AGOT MAKEER: I think our defense is pretty elite. We were super prepared by all of our coaches. I think we all wanted this really bad. We were just ready.

Q. Everyone sees the celebration from both you guys. What went into this run mentally and emotionally that maybe you don't always talk about but the team understands?

TA'NIYA LATSON: I feel like through the adversity and everything that we went through, through the highs, through the lows, we stayed together. We got closer. I feel like every loss we had this season, it led us up to this moment.

Especially in the tournament, we all locked in. Especially after that Texas loss. I feel like we just stayed together and we locked in. That's what led us to this moment.

Q. You aren't new to the Gamecocks spirit, but how did it feel to see them travel here to support you guys?

AGOT MAKEER: I mean, I feel like we know the fans are going to show up regardless of where we are.

DAWN STALEY: They were in Sacramento. Now they're here in Phoenix. They're going to follow us obviously on Sunday.

Yeah, we're very appreciative.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yes.

Q. Ta'Niya, back in 2023 Raven Johnson talked about how that loss really made her almost not even want to play basketball. Being that you are a close friend of hers, how would you say this is just a lesson of perseverance at the highest level?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Around this time last year, I was packing up my house in Tallahassee, my apartment. I was watching the game. Even though I wasn't committed at the time, I was hurting for her. That was my sister.

Just to see her sad and cry on TV, I carried that hurt with me through the season. It made me play for her and play for my teammates and my coaches.

It's like a sisterhood. Everything that they feel, I feel.

Q. Coming into this game, UConn undefeated, was that a bit of a motivating factor for you to end their undefeated season?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Not really. Really we just approached the game like any other game. We knew the stakes were high, playing in the Final Four against UConn, a very great team. We approached it like any other team. We had to play South Carolina basketball, and I think we did that today.

Q. Ta'Niya, there's always a lot of celebrating that happens with high offensive performances. To have a defensive performance like this, how satisfying is it as a team?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yeah, I mean, it's really satisfying. Like, we praised Coach Mary for the scout. I mean, she told us what we had to do. I feel like we executed really, really well.

Defensively it was a master class, Coach said. We're just really proud of ourselves. Yeah, we got one more.

Q. I want to talk to you about how your freshmen year coming into this program, making it all the way to the championship. What are your thoughts on this climb at South Carolina?

AGOT MAKEER: Super excited, especially going into Sunday. It's my first national championship. I think I don't really have that freshman title anymore. We're so far into the season. You just have to be ready to play. I think

going into Sunday, my mindset is still the same. I'm going to come like that.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Period. (Laughter.)

Q. What lesson did Dawn Staley instill in you? How do you build off this momentum heading into the national championship game?

TA'NIYA LATSON: I mean, she instilled belief in us. That was the topic of the whole thing, the whole game. Just to believe, to have confidence.

We had to go out there and play South Carolina basketball. I think we did that. Coach gave us the confidence, and she instilled belief in us. I feel like we all played like that today.

AGOT MAKEER: I agree (smiling).

Q. Ta'Niya, you talked about leaving and making a decision, being about this opportunity. What challenge did it present going from the role you had at your former institution to making the adjustment to get here?

TA'NIYA LATSON: Just staying levelheaded, remembering my why, why I came here, my purpose, my decision.

I feel like I was really confident in coming to South Carolina. I still am. I wouldn't change anything. I would 100% do it again.

I mean, my role obviously changed, but I didn't let that affect me. At the end of the day, I knew why I came here. It was to play in the national championship and win it.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, I want to thank you for your time. Best of luck on Sunday.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Staley.

Q. Can you shed any light on the conversation you had with Geno right before the buzzer ended. Two, last year to this year obviously is a big swing from Final Four game. Can you describe the emotions of last year's game losing and today winning, any redemption or anything you might feel?

DAWN STALEY: You can ask Geno the question. He's the one that initiated the conversation. I don't want what happened there to dampen what we were able to accomplish today.

The difference is, I mean, experience. I think losses, when you have losses that hurt, but you really understand the why, I think UConn was a really well-oiled machine. If you didn't have disruption and consistent disruption, you allow them to play as freely as they want to play and shoot as freely as they shoot, they're very efficient and very, very good.

Our whole objective was to get them to shoot as inefficiently as possible, make them put the ball on the floor. Don't give them as many catch-and-shoot opportunities. I thought our kids really locked into that.

They were scrappy. They were in gap help. They were contesting shots. UConn got back in the game. They were unbothered, right, by it. They knew what they had to do.

I'm just proud. Quite honestly the first time we played them last year, which was in February I think, or January, then come back and play them in the national championship game, I didn't know how we could come up with 25 points because they beat us by like 25 points the first time.

You know when you have an uphill battle, how you're going to accumulate some points. We just didn't have enough offensive firepower in the national championship game or the first time we played them in the regular season.

This time I thought we had enough firepower from an offensive standpoint. Then just from a defensive standpoint, this team has gotten better defensively in belief and utilizing their God-given abilities to lock in.

I thought it was a performance that makes you super proud. When they're able to execute, you can see it as a coach. Sometimes the players don't see it. What they did was just they filled in all the gaps that were created out there. Just super proud of 'em.

Q. It is I believe three straight national championship games for you. Four in the last five or something like that. Each has its own story. In the big picture, does that have meaning for you in a moment like this?

DAWN STALEY: You said four of the last five?

Q. I believe it's four of the last five, and the last three in a row.

DAWN STALEY: For me, I'm haunted by 2023. 2023, I'm haunted by that particular Final Four because of the players that we had and the season that we were having. It got upended. I never got a chance to coach the freshmen anymore.

We won it the following year. But that particular group was pretty special. I'm still haunted by it. For me, if we ever get the opportunity to be in that position again, which we were today, we're going to lay it on the line, okay? We're going to lay it on the line, figure out ways in which to win the game. I thought our kids locked into that.

They don't know that. They don't know that about 2023. But anytime you get here, you want to give your best shot at winning and advancing.

Q. Yesterday you talked about how you were confident that Ta'Niya was ready for this stage and the bright lights. She talked about how you were saying 'meet the moment'. How did you see her do that tonight?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, you see players, they just have a different look. When they have it, it gives you confidence to know that they're ready. Like, you know some players that you got question marks about whether they're ready to meet the moment. I didn't have any of that with Ta'Niya. Didn't have any of that with Raven. Joyce, none of that.

For Ta'Niya in particular, I think that Ta'Niya just made huge sacrifices, individual sacrifices. Wasn't an All-American this year. I want her -- if she's not going to get the individual awards, I want her to be part of a national championship team.

Q. They cut it to four about four and a half minutes left, didn't score a basket the rest of the way. Talk about the defense the rest of the game.

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I just thought that we made it real difficult for them to get clean looks. We made them put the ball on the floor. That's disruption to UConn, because they like they're a passing team, they like to assist. They did get 15 assists on 19 field goals. If they're allowed to play that way throughout an entire game, they win, they win.

I thought our players just locked in once we built a little lead, we got suggestions from coaches as to should we change our defense, start switching everything.

I'm like, No, this is what is working. Let's continue to do what's working.

We just created a lot of disruption. I didn't really realize they didn't score a point in the last four or five minutes. I was just really concentrating on coaching our team up and just try to score more points because they can generate points in a short period of time.

Q. People often talk about you. How much of this run

is a direct reflection of your players and the culture you've been able to command on and off the court?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, here is what we do. I love basketball. Like, it's my passion. It is the very thing I don't cheat on. I've been that way growing up in the projects in Philly. I've had people come in and out of my life. Basketball wasn't one of them.

Then my experiences of loving up on the game. The return is tenfold. My cup runneth over when it comes just what basketball has meant to me.

I coach from that. I coach really from the love of what basketball can do for you, it can do for your families, can do for creating young people who will go out in the world and understand through basketball there's some incredible lessons and success stories that make you valuable to whatever situation you're going to be in.

I'm just so happy that we got the victories to help keep young people confident in knowing that the sacrifices and the hard work that they put into it, you know, you win some of 'em. You don't win all of 'em, but you win some of 'em.

Q. In the first half of the game, you had Raven Johnson at 5'9" matched up with Sarah Strong. What was the strategy behind that? How would you describe her performance?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I mean, we went to a smaller lineup just to match what they were doing out there. I mean, Raven thrives on any matchup, right? Sarah Strong is not the tallest player that she guarded. We were put in the position where she guarded Kentucky's big, Strack. We know she's fearless when it comes to who she's guarding. She takes really great pride in not look people to score on her.

When you have a guard like that that has elite defensive skills, you let 'em be great.

Q. You had I think eight personal fouls in that game. Could you speak to how well your team defended the basket without putting them on the free-throw line.

DAWN STALEY: I thought our gap help was great. I thought we were really disciplined in chasing off the screens, not shooting, being in the play, right? We never let UConn get ahead of the possession. When you're able to dictate like that, you get in good defensive position.

I thought it was great. It was actually far greater than I envisioned.

Q. Even beyond the exchange we saw at the end of the game between you and Geno, there was a moment in the fourth quarter, Geno was evaluating your communication style with officials. What is your response to that exchange at the end of the game and his evaluation criticism of your communication styles with officials?

DAWN STALEY: I think that's a Geno question.

Q. Your players were saying you were pretty mad or animated at halftime. What was your message to them? What were you fired up about? How did you see them respond?

DAWN STALEY: You really don't get these opportunities very often. You don't. So you got to meet the moment. Like, if we lost this game, I know our players would have been mad at themselves because they're very capable. Like play to your capabilities. Play to the habits that we've had all season long.

If you can do that and end up losing, you can swallow it a little bit better. But when you don't meet the moment and you don't play to your ability, it always leaves you skeptic. It just doesn't stop there. Then you start pointing the finger about was I put in the best position to win a basketball game.

You got to get under their skin a little bit because you got to jolt 'em out of the state that they're in to get them back to who they are, like who they are. What you saw in the second half is who they are on both sides of the basketball, just making plays to get it done to help us get a win.

Q. For all you said to them at halftime, was part of you encouraged that you didn't play as well as you could and you're right there in that game?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, once I got out what I wanted to see, which is meet the moment, then you decompress and you just have give 'em information that is valuable. My information was, like, we're right there. Hold a team like UConn to 26 points, you're doing some really great things.

I just thought our offense, we were just making not the right decision. We just had to make quicker decisions. We had to put ourselves in positions where we got to play a little bit faster because they slowed it down. They pressed us. They made it hard for us to outlet the ball. We walked it up, played halfcourt basketball.

Once we broke into getting the lead when we started playing a little bit faster, getting the ball up the floor, actually trying to score, try to stay in transition a little bit

longer than we were in the first half.

Q. Both you and your players talked about the concept of being locked in. Can you tell us more what exactly that means. Some people would say if you know, you know.

DAWN STALEY: Being locked in is really understanding what the game plan is, really understanding personnel on our opponents, and executing it. Like, you can know and not execute it. For us, we knew, we executed.

We were deciding whether or not we were going to watch film last night. I let Ra decide. Ra, do you think we need to get another film session in?

Ra is like...

We did another film session. You could see the players really lock into what needed to get done. Probably after game 20 in the regular season, some of 'em are half paying attention because it's just routine. But when you get to this level, you want to see a little bit more. You want see all the players locked in and all the players asking questions about whatever the game plan is. That's being locked in.

Q. From a culture-building perspective, what is it like getting this win in front of former and future players like Aliyah and Jerzy Robinson?

DAWN STALEY: I really can't speak on her, right?

But Aliyah Boston, I'm always happy to see Aliyah Boston. Again, at the 2023 Final Four, she was a part of that. Every time that we see each other, I think it drives her a little bit, too. So I'm just proud. I know she's proud. I know she is proud of every team that's come after her knowing what she went through and knowing what they're going through.

I'm proud when we're able to make our alumni proud.

Q. In the fourth quarter, I think there was an extended period where Raven was on the bench. I know you speak highly of how she controls tempo, is a coach on the floor. If you're willing to share, why did she sit for that extended period?

DAWN STALEY: One, I thought Mouse, Maddy McDaniel, did a really great job. Sometimes when you're coaching a game, you're looking for a unit that can play well together. The more time that we could have given Raven on the bench, the fresher she was going to be when she returned.

I mean, Raven's the first one that will tell you let her stay. She's doing great, let's not... That's the way we operate. It's about what unit's working together.

Once you have a strong enough culture, when you can sit your All-American point guard for an extended period of time in the fourth quarter, and they really understand it is about winning. Raven's the best at really understanding. She only wants to win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time.

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