

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

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Mortgage Matchup Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Raven Johnson

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joining us is Raven Johnson of South Carolina. At this time we'll open it up for questions for Raven.

Q. A quick moment last night. Right after the game when all the stuff is going on, come up to Dawn and give her a high five. What is that like for you to see her hyped, giving that energy and standing up for you guys, with that energy?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I honestly just saw her screaming. Something she doesn't usually do. I ran over to her quick. Like, I don't play about Coach Staley at all. We've been through a lot together. She fights for each one of us outside of basketball.

When she's in situations like this, I'm always going to have her back. I don't know why I gave her a high five. I gave her a high five. She gave me one back. I saw Tessa. She was laughing. I was just trying to calm her down in the moment, yeah.

Q. Yesterday Ta'Niya was talking about 2023, seeing the hurt that you experienced then, the motivation that gave her to help you guys to try to finish the job. What has it been like going on this journey with a close friend?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It means a lot. Ta'Niya, she sacrificed a lot to come here. She was at Florida State. She could score 50 points, 40 points a night. She came here to do one thing, that's to win a national championship.

I remember in 2023, she was one of the first people to call me, check up on me as a best friend. It meant a lot to me. She didn't even know how I felt. She didn't know what it meant to be in those shoes. She was the warm-up person to check up on me to make sure I was good.

I want to win the championship for her and my teammates.

Q. What have you seen from Maddy specifically as she's grown over the season?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, Maddy, she's ready. Whenever her number's called, she's always ready, she's poised. But she's next up. When I'm going, she's going to be the next person to be in that position. To play point guard for Coach Staley, it's hard. You have to be her version of her on the court. Mouse, she learned a lot from me. She's always asking questions. Whenever her number is called, she's ready. I think that showed last night.

Q. Yesterday Dawn mentioned something about before the game or the day before the game, she didn't know if you needed to watch film again. You were like, We need to watch more film. For you in the time that you spent here, what has it been like stepping into that role? Why you felt like, No, we need to dig back into this a little bit more?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, kind of go off like a look, sound and feel thing. I felt like we need to take the extra step and watch film, watch our matchups. Little things hike that. Not just with the team, I think you should watch film on your own, too, just knowing your personnel. That can go a long way on the court when you're one step ahead. I told the team, watch your matchups, help others. Try to help people that have never been in those situations. Little things like that. That's why I said we should watch film.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Madina's growth. Coming to a new country, she said how much everybody helped her at South Carolina. She was at Mississippi State before. What have you seen of her personally and on court?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, Madina, she's, like, a big bear, a person you just snuggle with. She's my roommate on campus and roommate in hotels. I seen a lot of adversity she went through. In the summer she was crying. She was saying, I didn't know this was this hard, coming to this



program was this hard. I thought it was peaches and creams. I was like, Madina, it's not no peaches and creams here.

She was like, I don't know if I fit this program. I don't know if I can handle all the adversity.

I said, Madina, you're going to handle this. You're not the only one that's going through it. There's other people on this team going through it. But you got sisters, you got coaches that want to see you succeed. You have to hit the rock bottom to be with the highs with the highs. I think she hit the rock bottom to get to the highs with the highs.

There were times during the season that Coach didn't let her start so she could see and feel the game. I think that helped us. When she said she's back, she meant that. She's back.

Q. What are some of the common misconceptions that incoming teammates and the general public may have about South Carolina basketball?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I don't really be on social media. I don't be on Twitter because that is a toxic app. I can tell you honestly (smiling).

I'm saying for athletes, if you play sports, women's sports, stay off Twitter because those people are crazy on there.

Q. With the way that you were able to have a unified force defensively in the game yesterday, what aspects of that do you want to see carried over tomorrow?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I always been saying defense wins championships or defense wins games, honestly. If you can stop a team from scoring under the points they usually score, that goes a long way.

Everybody with score the ball, put the ball in the basket. We can stop those top players on team, I mean, that guess a long way. I think that's going to help us for tomorrow, too.

Q. I wanted to know you've been here before and you've won and you've lost. What is the mindset going into the game for tomorrow? When did you learn that you were going to be guarding Sarah Strong last night? It looked like your early defense seemed to frustrate her.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh... I tell you one thing, we keep saying is believe. Believe that we can make the next stop. Believe you can put the ball in the basket. Believe in each other. That's the biggest thing. Believe in the circle that

we have, don't let nobody break that circle what we have. Nobody knows what we went through in the summer.

Nobody knows who we are, honestly. Sarah Strong, talk about her, gosh. She's strong. They say her name, she is very strong. When I was on her, I was like, geez, I have to push this heavy girl for 20 minutes or whatever I have to do?

But she's a really good player. I was jut trying to fight aggression with aggression. If she pushed me, I was going to push back. I wasn't going to back town. I'm not scared of nobody. You can be 6'7", you could be 7 feet. Even Allie, shoot, I'm not scared of her. She's 6'7", and I push her, too. Little things like that when you're trying to win.

Q. There's been an effort over the last few years to make sure that women are treated correctly throughout each level of this tournament. How has that been for you guys this time around?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I think it's been pretty fair, pretty good. I remember when I was in high school, there was a time on social media where the weight room was pretty small. They were, like, joking about it.

I think it started with things like that, speaking about things like that to get where we are now. I think it's pretty fair. Pretty good. Hotels are nice. I think they're giving out really good gifts to the players. Not even that. They're treating you guys right also. The fans. I think it's pretty fair. I think it's pretty good.

Q. I see you're wearing an A'ja Wilson shirt. She has been very complimentary about you this season. Were you able to speak with her after of the game? Has she shared any advice?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh yeah, no, I haven't spoke to her. I'm pretty sure she's going to say, Go win it all. She started this, honestly. The first national championship, she brought to this school, we just trying to kin the continue the legacy. Trying to win for the people in front of us.

Q. You've been in this situation before. How has your mentality shifted throughout the season? How do you stay disciplined in a national championship and motivated?

RAVEN JOHNSON: How do I stay motivated? I mean, Coach Staley. In practice. I'll be honest. How do I state motivated? I was to win honestly. Doesn't matter. I want to win. I don't want to just win for myself, I want to win for my teammates, for Coach Staley, I want to win for South Carolina. I want to win for the people that was in front of

us. I just want to win (smiling).

Q. Obviously there was a lot of controversy after the game last night. How are you guys addressing that within the team? If Coach Staley has addressed any of that with you all directly?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, things happen. We're not going to dwell on that. I mean, we onto the next game. Really it wasn't that big of a deal, but yeah...

Q. UCLA is a terrific team obviously. What will be the key to beating them? You've been to quite a few Final Fours now. How does your experience in Phoenix compare to other Final Fours?

RAVEN JOHNSON: We just going to go out there and be ourselves. Execute what the coaches have for us. We have a high standard here, keeping that standard, which is keep the main thing the main thing.

I say this is no different than other Final Fours or championships. It's a whole new team. But at the end of the day we have one end goal, that's to win the national championship. Like I said, we going to keep the main thing the main thing.

Q. You've seen a lot of different iterations of this team. What do you make of Coach Staley's ability to adapt play style or roster makeup to continue being in this position?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Coach Staley is a great coach. Not even a great coach, a great human being. I think she lets people be comfortable with who they are. No matter who you are, I think she try to instill confidence into each player. There can be times when you're not confident in yourself. She's going to make sure you're confident in yourself.

I think she does a really good job, not even her, the coaches do a good job of recruiting good type of players with great attitudes, great personality that can come in and feed off each other, have a great circle of great women. I think that goes a long way when you're coaching a group of girls like that. Players that want to dig in deep and play for bigger than themselves. They want to play for each other, for her, for South Carolina. It's bigger than just the game of basketball honestly.

Q. Your coach could become one of the four coaches to win four national championships. How much will that mean to you to make that happen for you and yourselves? Do you think she's going to love joining the company she will be in, including her buddy Geno?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I didn't know that. In the name of Jesus, amen. It means a lot. Coach has done a lot for this program. Not even for this program, for the girls. I mean, she fight for us day in, day out, not with basketball, but with life aspects.

To win it for her, there's no better feeling, no better way to go out with a bang for her.

Q. Five for five in your career in Final Fours. How has your emotions changed from freshman year to this year going into this game?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, I remember my first time coming tot Final Four. I was looking at it as a trip, a little vacation trip. I seen the first gift. This is what we get in a Final Four. I need to start coming back here more.

I wasn't thinking about basketball. I was thinking about vacation. Like, I was thinking about getting away from South Carolina or places that I already been to.

But now I think of it as a business trip. I'm used to being here. It takes more than just being here, you got to lock n buy into the process. I'm trying Title IX still that to the younger girls who here. Enjoy the moment while you're here because moments like this don't happen forever. When it's time for business, be locked in, be in the moment where your feet are.

Q. You have shared very openly about your adversity, physical adversity, mental adversity. You've also proven to be an outstanding leader. How has that adversity shaped the type of leader of you are?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh, I think it made me the person I am today. I mean, I'm the type of leader that jokes. I joke a lot. I say things when it's probably not meant to be said. I don't care honestly.

But I think they listen to me. Even on times when I don't think they're listening, they're listening to every little thing I say. I can't be talking about basketball. They be like, why do you say that? They ask me questions. I need to watch what I say sometimes. I just need to be true to who I am. I don't change myself for anybody. I think injuries have made me who I am today. I don't care what anybody say about me. I don't care if you don't like me. I don't care if you do like me. I'm going to stay true to who I am. I'm not going to let anybody change me.

Q. Cori Close started her presser off yesterday and said I wanted to apologize for the rugby match and 23 turnovers, making a joke about what the game looked like. As you scouted them, watched that game, what

watching them is like? How important will it be to make them turn the ball over?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Wait, sorry. Repeat that question again.

Q. As you have watched UCLA-Texas yesterday, what you saw in that game, and how important it will be to fluster them, like a defensive matchup?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I think if we come in with the same mindset and tenacity we did yesterday, I think we'll be good.

Like I said, defense wins championships. We're going to try our best to turn them over. They're really good team also with really good players. We can't take them for granted. I think we're just going to execute what the coaches have for us.

Q. The matchup that you drew yesterday on Sarah Strong, among the hardest ones that Dawn has put on you, where does that rank? If not the top of the list, who is the hardest player?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, she's top two. I say probably Mikayla Blakes. She's a really good player. She moves well she's fast. She moves without the ball. She's very smart. Gets to her spots. She knows where her spots are.

With Sarah Strong, they're active players. She's more like a post. She's strong, physical. She gets to her spots, too. They're really good players. They're definitely top two.

Q. You mentioned Allie earlier. What has impressed you about the transition she's made coming in mid-season from another country? How have you helped her?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, Allie, she has impressed me in many ways. She's come in from, what, France, and she's learning things quick. I mean, that's pretty hard from a person that don't understand like a lot of English, which I'm trying to teach her some of myelin go.

The things she does, she's a sponge when it come to basketball. She's always asking questions. She has this winning mentality, too. I think watching her, I'm like, Wow, this girl, she's 16, 17, doing what she doing. I remember when Coach threw her in the Texas game. She was ready for the moment. When I was a freshman, I wasn't ready for that moment. I was scared. I think it's little things like that that tells you who coaches recruit, what they're bringing in, that tell you about the future of this program.

Q. Last night your team beat UConn. You're focused on beating UCLA for tomorrow's game. There are many stakes involved. When you watch UCLA's film, what do you notice about their play and how would you describe their offense and defense?

RAVEN JOHNSON: They have a really dominant post, which is Lauren Betts. She also has really good guards around her, too. They're seniors. They're very experienced. I think they do a really good job of playing well with each other, playing off each other. I think we have to do a really good job of doing what the coaches have for us, executing the game plan they have. I think it's a really good game plan.

Q. Competing for another championship with Ta'Niya, in the locker room right now, she said she had a random thought about playing in a championship with you during the game last night. Can you talk about the high school titles you won together when you think about playing with her.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I always think of the GEICO national championship that we won. I remember we played a really good team. Me and Ta'Niya was feeding off each other, we were going lobs to each other. After that game we cried to each other, telling each other how much we feed off each other, what our connection is. Off the court carries onto the court.

Ta'Niya makes me a better version of myself. She pushes me to a point where I don't even know I can go. It's things like that that I really wanted her here for, is to win the national championship, but also just her by my side through my last ride.

Q. When we talked in November, you said your focus was on winning a national championship. You started the season with four new starters next to you. Eight or nine different lineups. What has this season taught you about yourself?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It definitely taught me to believe. It definitely taught me to trust my teammates, trust the coaching staff. But I think with this team, we have been through so much adversity. It started with Chloe Kitts going down in the summer.

I remember the day she went down, I closed my eyes and said, Jeez, what are we going to do? I probably should have never said that. It's little things like that where you have coaches, Coach has resources around us that uplift us. Freshmen like Gotti, Ayla, Madina, who is new to this, they're like this isn't even a Final Four. Do y'all know the history of this, South Carolina and UConn game? No, we

just wanted to win. Little things like that.

I mean, we all trusted one another with people going down throughout the season. Everybody stepped up when their number was called. Shout-out to Maryam. She's been phenomenal to this program also.

But when everybody number is called, they're ready for the moment.

Q. Could you talk about your ability to guard multiple positions, how has that opened up opportunities for Gotti?

RAVEN JOHNSON: We go small lineup, Coach tells me do what you do to stop the four player. Most of the time they're bigger than me. They're probably stronger than me. I don't back down to the matchup. I might tell I got her, whatever she needs toe to do, I got her. She puts Gotti on the ball, a terrific defender also. She has a knack for finding the ball, hunting the ball. That helps me also. I can get a little break or a breather guarding the post player.

It's little things like that that goes with this team. Everybody is going to do whatever it takes to win.

Q. Having been part of this program for so long, each team has its own unique journey, how would you describe this group's journey to get to this point? As a leader, what was required for you to pour into this team that might have been different compared to other years?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh, it was hard. There's days I did not want to lead. There's days I didn't even want to talk. I was like, Geez, I got to lead for 34 more games. Like Jesus.

It was overwhelming sometimes. At the same time I had to honestly suck it up and challenge myself to do that.

I didn't even think they were going to listen to me. I'm a jokely person. I joke all the time. It's rare that I'm serious. When I'm not on the court, I'm always joking. But they do listen to me even when I'm joking. I'm realizing that now. I'm stepping to the role that I have, which is leadership. But I think they watch my every move also, even on the court. It doesn't matter, they just watch me. I think I'm trying to instill pro habits into them, like Aliyah Boston instilled pro habits into me.

Q. (No microphone.)

RAVEN JOHNSON: It was a roller coaster. There were a lot of highs with the highs, a lot of lows with the lows. We

all stuck together. Even through the losses, like the Oklahoma loss, that tore us apart. It was more of a lesson for us. Like, I feel like we was getting a bit complacent when we kept winning. It just showed us that we have a high standard here. We need to keep our standard high, attack practice like it's our last day.

It was a roller coaster, for sure.

Q. A lot has been made of how hard summer workouts were this year, and Final Four Fridays with Molly. As one who has been here, how much harder was this than other summers?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh, gosh. What I remember is throwing up. Oh, my gosh. I remember passing -- I remember landing on the floor. Jesus, I'm glad this is my last year.

The first day we walked to the weight room. She had the UConn score up. We were like, Molly, okay, that game been over. Can you take this off the board?

She's like, No.

Everybody is getting mad. We went to a track one day. Let me tell you. Madina Okot blew me out in the track race. I'm like, Am I in shape? What is going on with me?

I remember throwing up. Going to a person that ate hot fries during the summer or hot wings. It's things like that that makes you better for Final Fours, Elite Eight game, when you can push through the moments.

I think that started making this team have the bond we have now, trusting each other. We were picking each other up in the summer.

It was like Olympic Games honestly, they stuff Molly had with us. It was crazy. The summer we had, we needed that.

Q. Coach Staley talks so much about the good of the game, the big picture in women's sports, wanting to be an advocate. How much does that weigh on you, if it does?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Uhm... Doesn't weigh on me a lot. I'm just out here to play basketball honestly. I don't think about anything else. I just want to win. That's really all I think about it. Whatever comes with it comes with it. The good, the bad, I'll take it.

Q. I see you're ripping the A'ja Wilson T-shirt. How does the history of this program impact your mindset?

RAVEN JOHNSON: She's a great leader. What she's doing now. I mean, every time you get on social media, you see her, her legacy.

She's done a lot for the game of women's basketball. Just to see what she done for South Carolina, we're trying to continue what she started. It starts with her.

Literally in her voice, the things she say doesn't go unnoticed. We literally watch and see everything she say. She's a great inspiration to us younger girls. We love her.

Q. After the loss to Texas in the SEC tournament championship game, you said the last time we lost a tournament title, we won a national championship. Here you are on the eve of that. What have you learned so much in the last three weeks?

RAVEN JOHNSON: We learned a lot about ourselves. Yeah, it sucks to lose, especially something you really want to win, which was the SEC title. Sometimes you can't win everything. Sometimes you have to learn the hard moments to make you better for more better moments, which is a national championship.

I think everybody found who they were. I think it was an identity thing also. I think everybody knew their role, everybody had to step up. Everybody had to bring more to the table. Everybody had to bring that to practice also, just know what it takes to be in moments like that. Don't take nobody for granted either, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Thank you.

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