

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

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Mortgage Matchup Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined by South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley.

We'll get straight to questions.

Q. Geno put out an apology this morning and a statement. Did he reach out to you personally? Do you want to have a conversation to clear the air? Responding to his response...

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, for me no distractions at this time. Concentrating on winning the national championship. That's it.

Q. As a quick follow-up to that, how disappointed or fill-in-the-blank word are you that this has dominated the conversation instead of your journey to make it back to the championship game?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, that's a little disheartening. At the same time, this is sports. Sometimes things like this happen. That's why I'm just going to continue to focus on our team and their ability to advance in this tournament, hopefully win another national championship.

I won't let my bubble voice come out (smiling).

Q. When you are in that moment yesterday and Raven comes over and high-fives you, I think from the outside we see your relationship with your players. What did that moment mean to you? How did that exemplify this relationship you have with your players?

DAWN STALEY: It's just so classic Raven, really classic Raven. I mean, she makes me laugh even in the most difficult situations 'cause she's so innocent. Like she really is a really kindhearted young lady. Sometimes you need

people around you to put things in perspective.

It was a calming. It truly was a calming for her to do that. Just to break the ice of what was happening in real-time.

Q. How do you feel you as a program have built this bubble to ensure those distractions and things that could undermine what you are trying to do not become a bigger thing?

DAWN STALEY: One, I had a praying mother, right? Two, I grew up in the projects of North Philly, right, Philly, 215, 267, area code. So nothing, nothing can derail us, or me, from staying with the task at hand. There are a lot of distractions that are placed in your life. You either going to address them and let it overcome or you stick with the task at hand.

I'm choosing to stick to the task at hand. At some point everything is going to be addressed. Today, this weekend won't be one of them.

Q. Obviously you're facing UCLA. We talked the other day about your relationship with Lauren, which was quite touching. Talk about the program, the challenge you face with them, Lauren perhaps in particular?

DAWN STALEY: UCLA is coached by a great coach, Cori Close, who has done a tremendous job with keeping that group together and formulating something truly special in getting back-to-back Final Fours, now to the national championship game. She's done it with players who believe in her and her system. Her system works.

We're going to be challenged because they are pretty methodical in how they want to cut you apart. So they got bigs, they got shooters, they got a point guard that's super smart. They're complete. Probably the only thing they don't have is a lot of depth, right?

I don't think any of us have the depth that we want to have, but when you got a strong seven like they do, they put you in positions to compete for national championship. We're up against that.

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They've been together. They're an experienced group that's used to playing well with each other. They've been in situations where they've been challenged. They're battle-tested. We got all of that that we're up against.

Q. Over the last five years, how have you seen Raven's patience develop both as a person and as a basketball player?

DAWN STALEY: Uhm... Is she patient?

I've seen Raven's leadership, like her leadership has grown from doing it by example to now verbalizing and still doing it by example. There's winning behaviors, right? Raven during this time only wants to hear and see things that are only going to help us. If she hears something or sees something that doesn't fit that, she addresses it, which I think is the coolest, right? It's the coolest.

She's going to be that way for the rest of her life now. Something feels a little off, she won't be able to help herself not to address it. I kind of love when young people really know who they are and not take what they feel, see or hear, something that isn't quite right with the core of who they are and what they believe in, to speak up. Raven has that.

I don't know if that's patience or not (smiling).

Q. How different would it feel to win this championship tomorrow as opposed to championships in the past?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, every championship is a little bit different. I think I spoke on just 2023 that I'm haunted by that one. Even though we won the following year in an undefeated fashion, that one still haunts me a little bit because of the people I was doing it with. Didn't really get a chance to end their careers off on the note in which we were very capable of doing.

This one would probably, if I had to give it a title, it would be sacrifice, sacrifice for players like Ta'Niya Latson, right? Sacrifice for Raven. Us not having her in the future. Maryam who has committed to us for the past two years, whether she plays one minute or 10 minutes. I don't think she's ever played 20 minutes. She really doesn't care. The only thing she cares about is winning. We have players like that that commit to the sacredness of a team, means the world to me. I want it for those young ladies.

Q. I wanted to ask about Lauren Betts because you've coached a lot of great bigs in your career, coached against a lot of great bigs. Where does she compare?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, she brings about a great challenge. One, because a couple years ago you could kind of be real physical with her, she would kind of back down a little bit. Now she embraces it, right? Now she welcomes it. She can play off of it so well. You have to make a decision whether you're going to double her, single cover her, whether you're going to triple her, then figure out how you're going to scramble out of that and prioritize who because they can shoot the basketball.

She's the focal point. When your big is the focal point, it's hard. When you work inside-out, it's really hard. It's what we have predicated on my entire coaching career, is to be that way, whether we had six-foot post players or 6'7" post players.

Everybody's challenged when teams work inside-out. Lauren can see it all and is patient enough to read the defenses and pass the ball where it's supposed to go or bet on herself.

Q. Gotten any resolution on Madina's solution? If you get a no, do you consider going to the courts?

DAWN STALEY: Well, we bought ourselves 48 hours, more hours, right? It's 96.

No, I'm hoping to hear back shortly. I think our compliance is doing a great job. It's just keeping the lines of communication open. The NCAA always asks for more and more information, more and more information. Madina is complying with getting the information. Hopefully they'll have an answer soon.

We're talking about Madina's returning for a fifth year.

Q. You obviously have given all of 82 your players roots and wings. With regards to the unified attack on the defensive end, how are you going to carry that force into tomorrow's game? What will it take to tactically disrupt UCLA?

DAWN STALEY: It's just that. I mean, we have to shrink the floor on Betts. She can't just play in space. They create the space. We're going to have to try to take some of the space away with how we're guarding. It's all predicated on whether or not we're going to double or run somebody at Betts and when we will do that and who we do it from.

The percentages are real with how they shoot the basketball. We have to limit the amount of times they get catch-and-shoot opportunities. We want them to two us rather than three us. How we accomplish that hopefully is by running around and being in the proper defensive

position, especially our help.

Q. How has Raven's ability to guard positions one through four created more opportunity for Gotti? How does that versatility help the whole team get more opportunities?

DAWN STALEY: That means everything to us. I think UConn went small yesterday. For Raven to be able to play Sarah, if they had a traditional line where they went big, big. Raven was guarding Sarah for a short portion of the game. We didn't really skip a beat. It was a different type of defense that Sarah was probably used to being guarded by, which was being physical, playing underneath her, just make her think more like a guard versus a big.

That allowed Gotti to be on the floor a little bit longer. We needed Gotti to be on the floor because if Raven didn't have Fudd, we needed Gotti's length, which is a different look for her as well. We were able to be a little bit more versatile in our small lineup because of Raven's ability to be fearless and guard anyone.

Q. With the transfer portal and NIL, what impact has that had on building team chemistry and getting players to buy into a particular role?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I think really for us it's all the same. I think we've been in the position of having still a core group of our players together that really understand how we like to operate as a team.

Yes, you discuss how you are and how you want to operate. Then the players will take over. We operate from a look, sound and feel. If something looks, sounds and feels off, or good, you address it and encourage it.

Basically that's my rule of life, look, feel, sound good, let's keep doing that. Bad? Hey, we might want to think about a different way of doing that.

Our players are really good about that.

Q. You talked last night about your deep passion for this game, obviously your roots. Tomorrow you could become the fourth coach to win four national championships. You'll do it in nine years, if you do it. You'll be joining some impressive names, one of them being your pal Geno. Will that make it even as especially sweet to join such a list?

DAWN STALEY: No, I don't really compare myself to anybody when it comes to it. I mean, I do what I do for our players. I do what I do for the coaches that I work with every single day. Those are the people that are in the

trenches. Other people outside of us, I'm never really compared myself to.

So no. Win another championship is important. It's important for our fans. It's important for our athletics department, our university. If you can produce championships, maybe you can reduce the amount of articles that go out with how much money we spend against the budget (smiling).

I know I'm going off on a tangent.

'Cause the article wasn't meant -- the article that was written wasn't meant any harm. It wasn't intentional. But because of it, it causes a ripple effect of breaking down why we spend so much money on women's basketball.

You have to address and measure all the metrics. If you just go dollar for dollar, not every school is going to be in the black, right? Every school is going to be in the red. But I do think we give contributions to the university from a data standpoint. Those are or should be dollar figures behind it. They have the numbers. They have the data on campus to calculate that.

I don't know what it is. They'll probably never let us see what that is. But I'm sure it would actually reduce the amount of money, that figure that was out there, how much money we spend over budget.

Q. Virginia announced they're parting ways with coach. Your thoughts on the program, not the specific move. Do you remember back playing to the first time coaching in the championship game, what is it like for UCLA's first time here?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I just heard about that. I did reach out to our athletic director at Virginia. She just told me that they did part ways. I don't know why. She said, We'll talk soon. I think I reached out to Coach Mox as well just to check on her. Really haven't had time to have a conversation with her. I don't know what went wrong, but I think she had them on the right track.

I hope we get it together. We have a deeply rich tradition at UVA on this stage. We hope to get our team back there one day sooner than later.

I mean, the first is always special. It's always special to get here, to exhale. I think Cori and UCLA, because they were here last year, you really have some type of expectations of the little bit of prep time that you have. We had an hour on the court. We got an hour open practice. That's all we're going to do. We're not going to go to another site because rest is equally as important as getting in there.



It's special. I mean, it's special. You're playing on the last day of college women's basketball. It's a great honor and a great feat whether you win or lose. You also are measuring where your program can continue to go. For us, 2017, we won it. I'm hoping that's not the same for UCLA on Sunday (smiling).

It's really cool. I'm happy, genuinely happy for Cori and UCLA. Really am. You want to see your program progress in a way of not just 20- and 30-point-win seasons. You want to see it competing for a national championship, like really competing for a national championship.

Q. Back in 2023 you faced UCLA in the Sweet 16. Two players, Gabriela Jaquez and Kiki Rice, kind of like their version a little bit of Raven. You've had Raven for five years, kids who stuck with the program. Do you have any thoughts on those two kids, what they've meant to UCLA?

DAWN STALEY: Rare that top players like them stay with the program that they've been with. There's a lot of poaching, a lot of stuff that goes on.

But I think it goes to show the strong relationship that they have with Cori. I think Cori does a really good job at making sure players have exactly what their needs are from an NIL standpoint, from a nurturing standpoint, from a basketball fulfilling standpoint.

I think it's great. It's only fitting that this is their consecutive Final Four appearance and their first national championship appearance. It means they are the cornerstones of their rise to this level.

I mean, I love the fact that they're loyal. There's nothing stronger than having that trust and that loyalty to stay with the program you were with.

Q. When you talk about the experience, obviously the quick turnaround, that's the format, with your experience in that, what is the balance of obviously breaking down film, but the importance of more so in-game adjustments coming into a championship game?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, you do rely on your staff to be prepared. Obviously we watch a whole lot. I probably don't watch as much as the coach that has the scout. So we're always prepared.

We probably have too much information to where you want to make sure you're not feeding the players a lot. Like, I had a lot I wanted to do against UConn. I was like, No, let

me just stick with what has gotten us here, then some adjustments we could have made during that particular game.

Was hearing a lot, was hearing a lot from our staff, was hearing a lot from Mary Wooley who had the scout and did a tremendous job. When we got up a little bit, they didn't call a timeout to advance the ball. I think they were in that position. She was like, They like to run the sideline, the sideline break. Let's get in our containment press. It was great. Shaved a lot of time off the clock.

You rely on the experts. The experts really are the assistant coaches who do a really great job at just making sure they have the information. We need to have the information. We don't know what's happening out there. When you put us in a position to possibly lose a game on the biggest stage. You're not promised to get back here. You want to make it count.

Q. Can you just share what are you most proud of Maddy's growth to now? What did you see from her last night?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, Maddy has been growing. A lot of times you forget that she's just a sophomore, right? She's one that is high-performing, especially in practice, low-maintenance, really quiet person. Just comes to work without complaint.

I thought she was big for us last night. I mean, Raven was pretty exhausted from having to guard Azzi Fudd and Sarah Strong, to having to get open. She had to get open. They put a lot of pressure on her to get open. She expended a lot of energy trying to do those things.

By the fourth quarter when we took her out, maybe we took her at the end of the third quarter to give her a break and the timeout. Maddy was playing extremely well so we just kept her out there.

Was Raven ready to go back in? Raven is like, No, they're playing well together, so keep her out there.

That is the kind of the just culture that we have. Would Maddy get mad that we put Raven back in? No, not at all, because she understands what it takes to win.

It is about combinations. It really is about what combination, what unit of five players are playing well together. We'll just let 'em string out. We'll play 'em till the cows come home or the momentum shifts.

Maddy was definitely a momentum shifter for us because of her speed and her ability to make passes. She had a

big bucket during the time we needed bucket in transition.

Q. You talk about how rare it is for players to stay for all four years. It's getting more difficult for coaches to get long tenures at programs. We talked about Virginia. Both you and Cori have been with your programs for well over a decade, 15 years for her. You got a little bit of leeway early on in your career before the really big successes. How important was that? Were you in those early years worried every year about your job, or did you have some security? What advice would you have for other athletic directors about those early years?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, early years... I mean, our athletic director at the time, Eric Hyman, he was telling me when I first got the job at South Carolina that it's going to take three years.

I'm like, Three years? Three years to get it together?

I wasn't very patient. I thought we would get it together prior to three years. In about three years we were able to get our footing a little bit, see the improvements not only just on the floor but also in the win column. So I was secure enough to get through that trying time.

The A.D. also had in his mind how long it would take. When you have someone in tune, like in leadership, that really understands, really understands, 'cause sometimes it's not about the wins and losses in the beginning, it's about culture shift, about seeing that the product on the floor is making the move, seeing if the community is supporting it. All those things matter. You need that.

When you actually looking at taking a job, you want to make sure that you and your boss are on the same page and have the same outlook. Part of that is just being able to be like the ultimate communicator.

I mean, it's hard nowadays. It's hard to juggle year to year how you be successful in this state of our game with NIL, with just impatience. It's really hard.

I don't really have the answer to it besides if you're going to go in a situation, make sure you're supported with all the resources you understood to be successful. A lot of that is NIL. You can probably handle some of the other stuff, but it's really NIL to be able to be successful in this space.

Q. You've hit on Cori a little bit. How have you seen her grow as a coach? What do you think she does really well?

DAWN STALEY: I think Cori is a connector. She connects

with her players, she connects with the community, she connects with powerful women that can help her as well as her players.

She uses her voice. I think she's very in tune with the state of our game. Very in tune. She doesn't mind sharing. That's the key. You got to be able to share what you know in order for our game to grow. I do think she's a spokesperson for our game and she's one that really has used her voice for the advancement of our sport.

Q. For you and Coach Close, both of you all have young coaches on your team. Why is it important to give them an opportunity? With your players seeing them, not all of them are going to go play professionally, so for you how is that also an example for them for the possibilities that are available to them outside of just being a player?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's very important. I think the NCAA allowed two extra staff members, so we have six. I think we have six coaches. One, two, three... Maybe we have five. We have five, five assistant coaches. It allows you to mentor younger coaches so our game is safe, right? It's hard to get in our game, that's one. Two, I think when you're able to utilize one of those spaces for a young coach, you can help guide them to being a better coach.

For us, we chose to go younger, former player, because we need that energy. I'm getting older (smiling). It's hard. We need. Khadijah Sessions is the young gun on our team. She has the energy to keep up with every trend out there. Our players really respect her because she's in the gym with them all the time. She plays a pivotal role in the growth because she's a phenomenal developer.

It's cool. Like you need to have those young people on your staff so they can grow within the whole coaching tree of women's basketball.

I do think it's important that our players see people who are closer to their age than our age in that position 'cause they all won't go to the WNBA. Probably a small percentage, slim to none, will go to the WNBA. It probably has reduced that because of how much people are getting paid.

Veterans are going to stay in the game a little bit longer, will decrease the amount of opportunities that young people get. It gets pretty competitive. If you want to stay in the sport, the best way to do that is grad school, being an assistant coach.

So it's a win-win situation.

Q. You mentioned about your praying mother. Playing



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specifically during this holiday time, how would you conceptualize that? Do you have a guiding scripture for this weekend taking you into the championship game tomorrow?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I don't try to overly put my beliefs on people, but you asked (smiling).

I mean, I have an understanding of who's the reason for all seasons in my life, right? I got that from my mother, whether I liked going to church every Sunday when I was growing up or not. But I'm rooted in that, you know? That's my mother's legacy that she left with me.

So I have a really good understanding of the uncommon favor that's bestowed on my life. I don't really have a scripture going into this particular national championship game. I do have scripture that is near and dear to me. It starts with, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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