

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

Sunday, April 5, 2026

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Mortgage Matchup Center

**South Carolina Gamecocks**

**Coach Dawn Staley**

**Raven Johnson**

**Ta'Niya Latson**

**Tessa Johnson**

Finals Postgame Media Conference

UCLA 79, South Carolina 51

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by South Carolina. We'll open questions for the student-athletes at this time.

**Q. Raven, how much was their pressure overwhelming y'all? How tough was it to make a shot?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I mean, seen the score? Yeah. Score speaks for itself.

**Q. Raven, you've talked before how much Dawn Staley has meant to you. Now that your college career is completed today, what is the resounding message left with you?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: She means a lot to me. We've been through a lot together. Yeah, it hurts that it couldn't end the way we wanted it to end.

She always be like a mother figure to me. I always come to her about every little thing. Yeah, I love her.

**Q. What right now is going through your minds as you think about how this turned out, where you would like to move on?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, obviously, like Raven said, this is not the ending we wanted. But we got here. No one thought we would. We did it.

I'm very proud of the girls. I wouldn't have asked for a



better team.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yeah, obviously it didn't go the way we wanted it to go. We had a good season. Nobody thought we could make it here. I'm just proud of the girls in the locker room, the people that believed in that locker room, yeah.

**Q. I'm sure you spent a lot of time watching Lauren Betts on film. You played her last year. She's come a long way since. How was it to have to execute playing against her today with all the ways she affects the game?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I mean, she's 6'7". She has improved from last year. She's patient. I mean, she got, what, four seniors around her. She's a senior herself. Experience go a long way.

But yeah, she's improved. She's been through a lot herself throughout her college career, so yeah.

TESSA JOHNSON: Yeah, what Raven said. She's a very dominant player. She's pretty consistent and effective. I mean, that's hard to scout. We just tried to limit her.

**Q. Tessa, next year you'll be a senior, a leader of the team. How important is it to harness this feeling and express it so it doesn't happen again?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, obviously the look on our faces, we don't like this feeling. The standard here is to get here. I do expect our team to get here next year.

I mean, the girls in the locker room, the younger girls, they don't like that feeling either. So I guess just motivation.

**Q. As you head to the WNBA, what is the single biggest skill or thought process or element of your time with Coach Staley that you're going to take into that next level?**

TA'NIYA LATSON: Just patience, working on efficiency, working on my jump shot. She taught me a lot about myself. She believed in me as a player. I just got to carry



that into the league, carry her words into the league with me. Take everything that I learned here and carry it and elevate my game.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Pro habits and leadership ability. Made me who I am honestly. Not changing myself, yeah.

**Q. Coming into this one, did it feel like energy was different? Did it feel like Friday's game took it out of you and coming into this one you were on your back foot from the jump?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, I felt like we were ready. We knew we wanted it. But I guess we didn't show it out there as much as we thought we wanted it, if that makes sense.

I mean, we were prepared, but it just seemed like they were getting -- I mean, they out-rebounded us by how much? A whole bunch, yeah. We knew that they could rebound and we still didn't box out or go for the rebounds, do the extra plays and stuff like that.

But yeah...

**Q. Ta'Niya and Raven, what legacy do you feel you left behind for the next generation? What advice would you give to younger players stepping into bigger roles next season?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Just the process. There's going to be a lot of highs and a lot of lows, but believe in Coach Staley. She wants the best for you. You might not get what you want in that moment, but you just believe in the process and trust the process, everything will turn out good.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yeah, I would say the same thing: trust in the process. Working on your game constantly, getting better on all your weaknesses and listening, being patient, trying to elevate your game, and be a good teammate.

**Q. You mentioned Lauren Betts and rebounding. Anything else they did in particular that made it difficult for you guys tonight?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Like I said, all their starters are seniors. They're experienced. Experience do go a long way. They came out ready to play. Like she said, they out-rebounded us, had second-chance effort. Yeah, they were ready to play.

TESSA JOHNSON: I think they did every little thing. It comes down to every possession matters. You've seen that they knew that and they did that.

TA'NIYA LATSON: Yeah, every 50/50 ball went their way. Every rebound, they got second, third and fourth chance points. We didn't do the little things, we didn't do the intangibles. That's something that Coach talks about a lot.

When you're on this stage, you need to have that, and they did.

**Q. Raven, Coach talked a lot about your upbeat and positive personality. I still see a smile on your face. You're comforting Coach a little bit. How do you maintain that?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I'm just a bubbly person. I'm not smiling. I'm actually mad. I'm actually mad. But my personality is making me smile through the pain, if that makes sense.

But yeah, I'm not satisfied with the outcome that happened today. I'm just smiling through the pain.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, we thank you for your time tonight.

We'll open it up for questions for Coach.

**Q. Dawn, last year I think you said UConn out-talented but not out-hustled. Do you feel the same way today?**

DAWN STALEY: It kind of felt like the same thing. I thought they came out and disrupted from a defensive standpoint. Then they pretty much got what they wanted offensively. When they did it, they created second-chance opportunities.

We just didn't have it today. We tried, but we just didn't have it today. They were the better team today. Congratulations to them.

Sometimes you're part of women's basketball history. It's not favorable to you. You could see if you're going to lose to a team, like UCLA, you want to lose to a team that just really out-works you, out-executed you, made it very difficult for you to perform at a high level.

It was a direct reflection of what they did to us.

**Q. Can you sum up a little bit what this weekend was like for you, the highs of Friday, a rough one today, a little bit of drama in between?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's great. We got a chance to play on the last day of college women's basketball, a season of a lot of great basketball, great talent, great coaching. Just great viewership. I mean, when you're in

this position, you don't win all of 'em. There are too many great teams out here, too many great players and coaches that decrease your chances of winning national championships.

The trick is to continue to get here. The more you get here, the more you increase your chances of winning. So we got a lot of work cut out for us. I really enjoyed the weekend. I enjoy every challenge that basketball creates. I enjoy facing them. I enjoy dealing, playing the hand that I'm dealt. This weekend includes that.

**Q. How do you see Ta'Niya and Raven as WNBA players? Make the case for them ahead of next week.**

DAWN STALEY: I think they are well-rounded individuals from a basketball standpoint. They are great humans. You want somebody in your franchise that you see that's going to come to work every day on time, early, come in early, stay late, then everything in between.

They're great teammates. They're people that you want to play with. One, they're winners. Two, they just have a lot of basketball experience.

I just think that they're ready. They've created pro habits. A lot of what someone that's unprepared for a WNBA training camp, they'll be prepared for it. Maybe the terminology will be a little bit different. When it gets down to basketball, they can be coached by anybody.

**Q. That first quarter, it seemed like there were good looks you were taking that weren't dropping. Obviously the first semifinal you were able to get going in the second half. Couldn't get in a rhythm after the first quarter. How hard is it to dig out of that?**

DAWN STALEY: It's really hard. I mean, I thought the first quarter, first half, we had a lot of people taking shots that aren't normal for us. So we didn't do a good job of getting the people that probably was supposed to get some better looks the ball.

But I think UCLA had a lot to do with it. Not going to say that they didn't. They really did. I didn't think we had to play perfect basketball, but we had to play better basketball. We had to make shots, create offense for our defense. We had to be better defensively, actually pushing them off their spots. I think they got to where they needed to go. We didn't apply enough pressure for us to make an impact on the offensive side of the ball. Because you can have a good defensive possession, but give up an offensive rebound, that's just really deflating.

**Q. I know the sting of a loss is still present in the**

**short-term. Cori Close was speaking up here yesterday, and she spoke about how you had invested in her as a coach. If not quite exactly the student meeting the teacher, but to know somebody who you invested in has had that success, even though it came at your expense, what does that mean for you?**

DAWN STALEY: I'm always happy for people that worked hard in this game, who are really quality people. I want good things to happen for them. Cori is one of those people who really works at making our game better. Not just UCLA, but our entire game.

She's always speaking out, uplifting our game in so many areas that it's hard to continue to do that while maintaining the job that you have to do every day. But she finds the time.

Although we didn't win, I can swallow it because we lost to a really good human being and a good team that represent women's basketball well.

**Q. When you say the team didn't have it today, is that a mental aspect? What challenge do you kind of face in the game in attempting to pull them out of that state?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, I mean, we scored how many points? 51 points, right? I think we could score about 70 on any given day.

You could tell. Shorts were shot. I thought we didn't really do a good job at making extra passes, like the things we were doing probably worked for other teams, but other teams didn't have a 6'7". You have to navigate differently. You can't go in there thinking you can score over her or through her, so sometimes you have to go in there and draw and kick, maybe draw and kick another time. We actually wanted to do that.

We took the first shot available. Sometimes that shot didn't go in. A lot of times that shot didn't go in. We weren't creating extra possessions offensive rebounding. Things we do a lot.

The things we built our success on weren't happening for us tonight. And UCLA made us pay for it.

**Q. How did you feel about was the game different in a team that has never won a championship versus your team that has multiple championships? You said everything else would be addressed, but was there any impact of that distraction coming into this day? Did you feel that with your team or with yourself?**

DAWN STALEY: One, I mean, UCLA is a quality team with very experienced players who got a taste of being in the Final Four last year. You make adjustments. You use that experience as a learning lesson and you come back sharper and you increase your chances of winning. From last year to this year, they played determined last year, but they played more determined this year. They were so close. They've had the experience to do that. They took advantage of it.

As far as distractions, I mean, there weren't any distractions that caused us to lose this basketball game.

**Q. Both you and Cori, no matter what the situation, you always talk about the game, growing the game no matter what. What's the next mountain to climb for the game as you look forward?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, obviously there are talks of transfer portal, just getting ahold of the free agency part of our game. We got units now. We'd just like to see us increase those because that's where the value is. The value of our sport is going to be how much we can pour back into our budgets, how much we can actually be looked at as a sport that is revenue producing. We going to be always challenged with making that better.

It's a start, but it's not a start in which ADs at the end of the day aren't going to look at what we're spending and what we're doing in a sport that isn't bringing in enough revenue.

**Q. For Jaquez to have 21-10-5, how impactful was that on what happened here?**

DAWN STALEY: Hard matchup. Hard matchup. You come in a game, you know exactly what she's going to do, and she does it. I mean, it's hard. She's relentless. She's a relentless rebounder. She's a relentless just championship-type behavior. Intangibles that's needed in order for you to win. If you don't play, prioritize her on the court, she's going to make you pay. She did that against us.

**Q. It's early, but can you look ahead to next year's roster, where you might look to add in the portal, if at all?**

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I mean, obviously we got to add some guard play, definitely some lead guard play, some more athleticism in the guard department. I think our front line is pretty good, especially the ones that are coming back from injury, coming back to our team. We got to add some guard play.

**Q. Six straight Final Fours, third straight national**

**championship game, won two of those, three in five years. You know the stats. That level of success, do you feel like you've reached the point where over at UConn they say the pressure is if you don't win a national championship, people feel like the season is a failure. Do you feel like South Carolina has kind of reached that point? What does that pressure feel like?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, we feel the pressure anytime we lose a basketball game. I mean, everyone goes crazy when we lose one basketball game. It's hard out here, it really is hard in our sport.

So, I mean, we do feel the pressure. We're used to winning and we're used to winning at a pretty high clip. How long you sustain that? We don't know. We just try to wake up every day and just be better than we were the day before.

To get here is hard. To win here is harder, right? We just have to keep getting here and make adjustments when we don't win. Obviously we got smacked today. We got to figure out how we smack back and put ourselves in the position where we're hoisting the trophy at the end of the day.

**Q. In sports we talk a lot about it's delayed gratification. For Cori Close, it took her 15 years to have this opportunity to lift the trophy. You know what that's like. To see the way she has continued to invest specifically in her program, stay committed, what can you say about her character?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, that's what you want. You don't want to be given anything. You want to work for it. I mean, 15 years is a long time that you've dedicated to young people and to our game. The game finally paid her back.

I think it took me 17 years to win a national championship. At times we got close, in '15. Someone would send me a text message, What's delayed is not denied. That's the case with Cori.

But it's super gratifying. I know the feeling in their locker room. I know you're just full because you've reached the mountaintop and you've done it the right way. When it's like that, it's incredibly gratifying.

**Q. You said the goal is to keep getting back to this point to increase your odds of being able to win a championship. You've brought a number of different teams with different makeups. What do you feel like the makeup of this team is and what can you build on as you try to fill those voids to get back to this point?**



DAWN STALEY: I mean, Raven was the last of the core group of players that had been together that actually had taken our program to the very top.

I just think we just need players who are committed to team, committed to getting better as individuals, creating pro habits so when they are challenged to perform at a high level, it won't be something that they wrestle with. It is a norm.

I think we do a great job of just keeping things in perspective for our players, creating spaces in which you can handle the truth and also creating spaces in which there's open communication, what's good, what's not good. We have those type of conversations. We need players that are able to handle those situations because that's what it takes to get to this point and win.

**Q. There are reports that Geno did reach out to you since we talked to you last. Can you share how, when, anything of that nature about the conversation?**

DAWN STALEY: Yes, that's a Geno question, right? It really is a Geno question. I haven't heard from Geno, so... I have not. I got 800 text messages. I don't know if he texted or not.

Like, I don't want -- this is UCLA's day, right? Let's keep it UCLA, them winning the national championship. Again, I will address all of that at another time, just not this weekend. We're not going to damper UCLA's day with it. We talk about South Carolina, us losing, talk about UCLA winning the national championship, what's great about our game today.

**Q. Bringing in Saniyah Hall next year, how excited are you to have her in this program?**

DAWN STALEY: Who?

**Q. Saniyah Hall. Actually, never mind. I apologize.**

DAWN STALEY: Did something come over the transfer portal (smiling)? That's USC (smiling).

**Q. For clarification, as you now reflect on this season, what is the one word you would describe this year, with the absence of Chloe Kitts as well?**

DAWN STALEY: You want me to be honest? I said this before, but don't take it, like, literally.

When we knew we weren't going to have Chloe Kitts, we considered her dead. We don't bring it up. She can't help us. She's not a part of our team in a way of preparation

and being on the floor.

She was in other areas where she would talk to the players and help them out. But when it comes to just game prep, we just didn't bring her name up once we knew she wasn't able to play.

**Q. Despite the loss this afternoon, when you consider your journey throughout this season, what is one takeaway you'll take from now going into next season?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, losing in the national championship game the way we lost, I guess that will be the thing that really drives us. You need something to drive you throughout the really hard times and the challenging times, and also the good times.

Although things can go well your way, there's always things that you can work on, there's always this situation that's lurking, like it's always lurking, always in the back of my mind anytime we lose. When we have an opportunity to win a national championship, you just try to get better, find the lessons within this game and try to get better.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, I want to thank you for your time this season.

DAWN STALEY: Thank you.

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