

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

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

## South Carolina Gamecocks

## Dawn Staley

### Semi-Finals Pregame Media Conference



I mean, it holds true. To have two SEC teams in over the past, I don't know, six years in the Final Four, it really means that we're doing something right. We are hiring the right people to ensure that these types of things can happen.

Obviously we're recruiting the right people, as well, because we can't be here without the sacrifices of our student-athletes.

**Q. I know obviously this team has been to the Final Four before. I guess, after winning yesterday, the excitement that goes into that, what is the coming down, if you will, process looking like for shifting gears and focusing on Iowa?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, right now the focus was just trying to get home and do some laundry and pack, get ourselves ready to get on this flight.

I'm sure on the flight our staff will probably sit down and talk about how we prepare to try to win a game against an incredibly talented and exciting Iowa team.

I mean, that's the short end of it. We haven't really had time to discuss anything as far as preparation because the turnaround is so short.

**Q. As an event, how have you seen the Final Four evolve from 1990 in Knoxville, Tennessee, with UVA, to now in the early 2020s as a head coach?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, there's rest time. There's a day in between. When I was playing, it was back-to-back. You played on Saturday and then Sunday. So I think the demand for us having some rest time in between, meaning the game has progressed to that. We're not trying to get our tournament championship in and out. We are spreading it out.

I think we're utilizing the time and space in between to market the product that is the best of the best. This is the third weekend of the NCAA tournament, and it's an incredible time and experience for all that are involved. Then especially the fans.

THE MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. I'm Rick Nixon with the NCAA. Welcome to the Women's Final Four head coach media availability. We'll have an opportunity to visit with the head coach of the South Carolina Gamecocks, Dawn Staley, the defending national champions. South Carolina is appearing in its fifth Women's Final Four in 2023. The 36-0 Gamecocks are seeking a third national championship.

With that I'll invite Coach Staley for an opening statement.

DAWN STALEY: I just want to say congratulations to all the Final Four coaches and programs. I'm sure we're going to put on, you know, a great couple of games this weekend that hopefully will end in somebody hoisting that national championship trophy and making it a proud moment and memory.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to our first question.

**Q. Coach, so I think the last time two SEC teams were in the Final Four was, like, 2017. I was wondering if you could just talk about the way that the conference has prepared you this year. People think of the SEC as a football conference, right? It's clearly a women's basketball conference, too. What do you think about that?**

DAWN STALEY: Some people think the basketball is football (laughing).

I mean, the reason why I came to the SEC 15 years ago was because I wanted to win a national championship, and I just thought that the league itself, how competitive it is, the coaches that are in the league, how much you're going to be forced to get better. You're going to be forced to pivot, forced to figure things out.



It's grown. It's grown. We have sold out Final Fours, really sold out. Sometimes we've said they were sold out when they weren't sold out. But there's not an open seat in any arena that I've been particularly a part of as a coach, in planning the Final Four.

The product is so much better, top to bottom. We got Virginia Tech who's never been to a Final Four. They played their way right into it and they deserve the No. 1 seed. They're showing everybody why.

Look at LSU, I mean, Kim Mulkey, her second year there, she got her team into the Final Four. I mean, that's something to be said.

Caitlin Clark, this is what she's wanted since she went to Iowa. She got her team to the Final Four.

I mean, there are just newer teams that are finding themselves in this position. It's just great for our game. Years ago, it was always the same teams, and maybe there was one team that maybe surprised someone by being in the Final Four that wasn't, like, the traditionally rich program.

The game has grown so much that really anybody, like any program, can make it to the Final Four because of the parity of our game.

**Q. Going off that a little bit, you talk about the parity. Is there any reason in particular that we're seeing that now, this year? What is it about this season that's kind of given way to that parity?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, I think the transfer portal has allowed programs to grow, like, instantly. Especially if you have a coach that has an understanding of how to move young people. Like you have to have a culture that allows -- to allow some restrictions, so to speak, and then some freedom. You have to balance that because you're bringing in different pieces to your program that can make a huge jump, like an Angel Reese to LSU, and also someone like Kierra Fletcher. Her numbers for our program aren't off the chart, but her demeanor, her poise. She is what we've needed in order for our younger point guard, Raven Johnson, to grow. It was seamless because we did our due diligence. We wanted to make sure that we brought somebody in here that would not culturally infiltrate what we have going on.

It's beautiful. I mean, it's beautiful. I know probably all the coaches don't like the fact that the portal gets so full so quickly throughout the season, but you also afford yourself to just find someone that can instantly turn your program

around.

It's something that us coaches have to deal with. It's a part of the fabric of our game now. If you utilize it the right way, I mean, you can make the jump and be a part of Final Four teams.

**Q. I don't know if you expected it, predicted or thought about it prior to the season starting, but you're currently coaching an undefeated basketball team. When I see you on the sidelines, aside from your teams not doing what you ask them to do, you seem calm, cool and collected. Do you as a coach feel any pressure, just any pressure as far as coaching this team, leading this team, into the Final Four?**

DAWN STALEY: Of course, I feel pressure. Pressure for our team to be successful, pressure to have our team perform as they performed all season long, pressure as a Black coach to win, like to win.

Then just the pressures that come with being the No. 1 team, being the No. 1 overall seed. You don't think it impacts you, but it does. It's not the driving force, though. It's not the very thing that I say I feel this pressure... I don't feel it in that way. I feel it in that I don't want to let whoever's looking at us in a way that lends hope to them. I don't want to let them down. I don't want to let our fans down.

I want what this team is supposed to have. Obviously we think it's a national championship, and there lies more pressure to win. But it's not something that, like, I'm not sitting here feeling like, Oh...

No, I mean, you know when you have a good team. Like, I know I have a good team. We're a really, really good team that's made up of a lot of experienced players who have been through every single thing that they could be a part of, including a pandemic year in which they didn't get a chance to participate in an NCAA tournament. So they feel that part of it.

They just walk in and embrace the pressure that comes with that.

**Q. You were in the last Final Four in Dallas. I'm curious what you remember from that time in 2017, the environment, kind of what stuck out to you from that tournament.**

DAWN STALEY: Dallas, it will be etched in my memory forever. I mean, it was the first time that we won a national championship.



I remember vividly the police escorts. I thought the Dallas Police Department was great. Enjoyed seeing them motorcade us throughout the city.

I remember we had a great hotel. I think it was the Magnolia. A great hotel. I remember our fans. I remember UConn losing. That was a huge moment in college women's basketball. I just remember a team that lost a huge part of who we were in Alaina Coates to injury. Then we found a way through having two transfers, I mean, this was before the portal was popular. They had to sit out a year, then they were eligible in 2017. They found a way to embrace their roles. Then we got on a roll to win.

I do remember Stockton. I remember having to stay in a hotel for what seemed like a week, and our players couldn't really go anywhere because there really wasn't anything to do. Then we finally got to Dallas. The first thing we did was we went to the mall, and they just thought it was the best time.

I just thought we balanced everything perfectly to put our players at ease. Then we got the luck of the draw in that Mississippi State took down the giant that increased our chances of winning the national championship.

**Q. Dawn, Kenny Brooks was telling us earlier about taking advantage of the platform that he now has to speak on issues that matter to him. How long did it take you, as you progressed from college to Olympian to the professional ranks to coaching, to become comfortable in that kind of role to the point now where you're filming insurance commercials with Mike Krzyzewski?**

DAWN STALEY: When you had the type of success that our team and our program has had over the past couple of years, you're asked different questions. Microphones are thrown at your mouth to speak on things that you hadn't had the chance to speak on. That was reserved for other people who were successful.

I think I would handle it the same way, meaning I will give them my truth as I saw it. But for me, I think when I got well into my 40s, like really, my 40s, now I'm over 50, life clears up for you. It gets more lean because you experience things and you are walking in your truth as an adult, like a seasoned adult.

I always equate it to I am my mother's child. I'm more like my mother now than I've ever been. She wasn't the one that really held back too much. She wore her heart on her shoulder. I believe I do the same.

I don't go out looking to start anything. If someone asks

me a question, I'm going to answer it the best way that I can, the most truthful and honest, the most organic way that I can. That's how I live my life.

**Q. Amazing how much smarter our parents get as we age.**

DAWN STALEY: It is (laughing).

**Q. What did you think of this new regional setup? Would you advocate for the NCAA to continue it?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I felt like it was normal, meaning from just a selfish reflection of being -- I actually liked it. I like the fact that we could go to games, that games were like right here where if you had an off-day, you could go watch some other teams play. The players, the student-athletes, had an opportunity to get out of their hotel rooms and go support other teams and to be around basketball.

I just think the city, Greenville, was very, very accommodating. I mean, it was electric. It was a great centrally located place where you can go walk, you can go see other fan bases, you can see your fan base, you could take pictures. It was just a real community of women's basketball, enthusiasts and lovers of our game. I thought it was great.

The only thing when you have a situation like this is you don't really have enough prep time. You only get an hour on the court. At this point you're not having two, three-hour practices.

I thought it was managed and organized extremely well. I would welcome it to being like this from here on out.

**Q. You talked about just the transfer portal, how it's been huge for the advancement of teams. You also used a huge word, 'culture'. How do you use the transfer portal to benefit you but not allow it to be detrimental in terms of fit?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, I think you utilize it in the sense of there are a lot of prospects going into the portal that you've already recruited, so you have some relationship with them or their parents or whoever it is, their posse. You have some relationship with them, so you know.

When Kamilla Cardoso went into the portal, Yeah, we got to go after her. We know her. She's 6'7". We have one of her teammates on our team, her AAU teammates. So I'm like, we know her. We know Kamilla.

We did not know Kierra last year. When we brought her on

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

campus, I mean, we vetted her through the Georgia Tech coaches, anybody that knew her, we were on the phone and we're talking to them about who she is. We talked to her parents. We brought her on campus. You get a feel for who they are.

You got to make sure that you're not just trying to get the most talented player 'cause they may not mesh with your culture. That's on us as coaches to make sure that you have to get it right because if you don't, you'll find that some of the kids you have on your team will jump into that portal, then you're finding yourself having to use the portal to actually fill the team. That's pretty hard, especially when you have to win. You have to be successful nowadays in order for you to keep your job.

**Q. I know this is looking ahead a little bit, but obviously the seniors on the team kind of have some decisions to make sooner than later as far as pro, staying, things like that. When did those conversations with them start? What does that process look like?**

DAWN STALEY: I met with all of our seniors. I'm just going to let them decide when they want to disclose what they're going to do.

For me, I'm planning on not having them. I have to plan on not having them. We'll have to jump in that portal regardless, regardless. I mean, regardless if we have some come back or all of them leave or all of them stay, we're still in the position where we must continue to recruit just in case, just in case.

But I think all of our seniors have put themselves in a position to be drafted. Whether or not they make a team, that's really not my call. I know there aren't a lot of roster spots this particular year in the WNBA.

We are constantly feeding them with information that will help them make that decision to go or to stay. But I'm sure they're talking to their agents and their representatives about what makes the best sense for them.

I'm not going to sway them. I'm not going to try to convince them to come back. I think what we've done here at South Carolina is put them in a great position to be drafted. That's our job.

**Q. When you think of South Carolina team basketball, you think of a very balanced attack. You don't see many stat lines jump out at you. What is your message heading into a team like Iowa where you know you have one player in Caitlin Clark that can basically take over a game? What's the message to**

**the team to stay within that sort of teamwork environment, not jump out and try to play a one-man show, especially in a game like the Final Four?**

DAWN STALEY: I don't really have to say that, anything to our team. I basically have been preaching all season long, Let's be who we are, let's display the habits that we've displayed all season long.

Obviously we really haven't played against a player like Caitlin and her ability to have a big game, fill up the stat sheet. So obviously I think for us, we have to take something away: her ability to score in bunches or her ability to distribute the basketball. She just really can't have the full tilt of what she does.

If you allow her to do that, they win every time. If she gets 40 points and 10 assists, that's pretty tough, that's pretty tough for any team to overcome because that means everybody is getting involved. You can't have everybody getting involved with how well they shoot the basketball and how well she facilitates.

**Q. Coach Staley, as I'm sure you know, last year after winning the national championship you became the first coach, Black coach, male or female, to win multiple DI titles. In light of you mentioning pressure earlier, I wanted to preface my question with that. In terms of your players you mentioned, the pandemic season a couple years ago to now, you might have a few players that might still be in your program, for this year specifically, what would you say is your team's biggest growth across this undefeated season?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I think the word that comes to mind is 'sacrifice'. Like this team, the individual sacrifice for the greater good of our team, has been great.

Aliyah Boston had staggering numbers last year. They're less staggering this year because she really doesn't care. She wants to win a national championship. She did the whole National Player of the Year, all of that. I do think she's a Player of the Year candidate. I do think she's the best player in the country for what she has to endure.

Through it all, she continues to make the right basketball play for our basketball team. And she sacrificed her stats for that. I think she's well aware of what our team needs. Like, I think she's taken the backseat to Zia because Zia is having the best year of her career. Brea Beal, the best year of her career. I can go down the line and say people are having the best year of their careers. They did not have that last year.

So Aliyah had the best year of her career as far as stats.



But I think this year is the best year of her career because she's able to pivot, she's able to give us what we need when we need it. This year is not averaging a double-double. It's not what we need. If she goes out and tries to force herself into getting double-doubles, then we won't have the type of year that we're having.

It is history-making. We must - we must - allow ourselves to look at who's the centerpiece in that and give her her props.

I mean, it's full of sacrifice, not just this year, but the entire... We call them the freshies, but the freshies have sacrificed individually at one stage of their career for the greater good of our team.

Historically speaking, that's where your National Player of the Year comes from, that type of team. It may be different this year. I don't know. For me, do I want my players to be National Player of the Year? Absolutely. If Caitlin Clark is the Player of the Year, am I going to be mad? Absolutely not. She's a hell of a player.

I mean, the stats jump off the page. So I'm not going to down her to lift my players up because everybody -- I mean, Angel Reese, what she's doing. I mean, it's never been done in the SEC, the double-doubles. We talk about their schedule, their non-conference schedule. Those numbers increased in the meat of the season and continue to do so.

So there's room for it all. I mean, Amooore from Virginia Tech, good God, seriously. We're talking about incredible products of our game. I mean, that's just off the top of my head. Like, there are much, much more players who are rocking it for our game. I just think it's a beautiful thing.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach Staley. We appreciate it. Congratulations again. We look forward to seeing you in Dallas.

DAWN STALEY: Thank you.

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