

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

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American Airlines Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Aliyah Boston

Zia Cooke

Semi-Finals Pregame Media Conference



other in a Final Four.

Like Aliyah said, I think a lot of people are going to watch it. I think it's going to do big numbers, and it's going to be a game that goes down in history.

Q. Aliyah, I know that the WNBA Draft is not at the front of your mind, but it is very soon. I wanted to ask, what do you think you will bring to a team at the next level?

ALIYAH BOSTON: That's a great question. I think my voice, number one. I think that I'm going to be a great communicator to the team. I think my post presence. I'm going to try and just continue to be that dominant post presence, no matter who I'm playing against.

Q. Zia, you and Caitlin played together on a Team USA, I believe the under 16 team. What do you remember about that matchup? How much has she grown, and how much are you looking forward to this matchup?

ZIA COOKE: Caitlin has always been a knockdown shooter since I can remember, and she's also a great teammate. I think we played together two years. All three of us played together. She's definitely a knockdown shooter, but her game has grown tremendously in a lot of different ways, and I can't wait to see it.

Q. For both of you, from the outside, it can look almost easy to do what you've done, go undefeated so far, because you guys make it look easy at times. I'm just curious, what are one or two challenges you've faced along the way to get to this point?

ZIA COOKE: I think just bringing it every single day. That's a huge challenge, and not a lot of people can do it, to be able to come into practice every day and know that you have to set the tone. You can't take any shortcuts. You can't take any breaks.

It's very hard. A lot of people don't understand how hard it is to be at the top. It's actually harder to be at the top than anywhere else, I believe.

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Welcome to Division I national semifinal Game 2 basketball conference with the South Carolina Gamecocks. We'll begin with an opening statement by Coach Dawn Staley, and then questions for the student-athletes, Aliyah Boston and Zia Cooke.

Good afternoon, Coach. If we could begin with you providing an opening statement.

DAWN STALEY: Super excited to be here. Congratulations to all the teams that are here. Look forward to tomorrow night.

Q. Aliyah and Zia, there's been so much talk and attention about this game, this Iowa-South Carolina matchup. I think people have been anticipating it all year. What is it like to be a part of that, and what does it say about the growth of the women's game that this is probably the most highly anticipated game at either one of the Final Fours?

ALIYAH BOSTON: It's really exciting. Just like you said, everybody has been talking about this matchup for a really long time. It's exciting that it's happening in the Final Four.

I think it's just a great game for women's basketball. I know there's going to be a lot of people in the crowd, a lot of people watching the game. Just super excited to be in that environment.

ZIA COOKE: I think that it just shows how much women's basketball is evolving, and people actually want to see us play. Luckily it's two good teams playing against each



Like I said, you've got to always keep your foot on that gas, and you have no time to take breaks off.

ALIYAH BOSTON: I also agree with that part, but also just continuing as upperclassmen, bringing the underclassmen along with us. You want them to know to be confident to shoot their shot in the game, just be confident and ready when their name is called.

Q. Aliyah, Dawn has talked a lot about the sacrifices you made for your own individual numbers and things like that. I'm just curious, was there a time where maybe that stuff was more important to you and that you've grown? How rewarding is it to make that extra play where you're setting up your teammates instead of necessarily going for yours, quote, unquote?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I think I've always been that type of player that wants the betterment for the team. So like you said, like my numbers are down, but I think it's because of what we have going on here. Everyone is stepping up. Everyone is hitting shots.

I think everything is being carried equally, and it's really good. If I could do it again, I would.

Q. So we've seen that there's more interest in the women's game through TV viewership. How does it feel to be part of a growing movement, and how have you seen that grow over your four years?

ALIYAH BOSTON: It feels really nice. You can always think about people making negative comments about women's basketball, women's sports in general, but it's proof that the numbers are going up. Everyone is excited to watch the women's game. Everyone is buying their tickets to travel to watch their favorite players, watch their favorite team.

So you can't really deny that people are interested in watching women's sports. So it's just really exciting to be part of the generation that's continuing to help it grow.

ZIA COOKE: Agree.

Q. I'm curious on how the alum of South Carolina have really encouraged you guys in your journeys ever since you were freshmen up until now. They've been in the same place. How have you guys used that encouragement, and how have you been able to do that for your freshmen?

ALIYAH BOSTON: A lot of the alum, they come back. They come to practice. They even reach out, and they talk

to us about things.

There have been a couple times where A'ja has reached out. They travel. Ty travels. They want to support us and give us tips where we are, and they just want to see us grow.

For us helping the underclassmen right now, they're our sisters. We want to see them shine because we understand at some point we're not going to be on the same team as them, and they're going to be the new leaders of the program. So we want them to continue the tradition that we have.

ZIA COOKE: I think alums have definitely helped me out a lot, especially with all of the guards. With Ty being here with us, she's been giving me tips just to be on the big stage again. Like I said, I want to do the same thing for the younger ones.

I've always looked up to Ty, and I think I've done a good job of leading the younger ones in the space I'm in now. So it's just a blessing to be here.

Q. They've got obviously a great player guard who scores 27 a game, and a post who scores 17 a game. When have you encountered an outside-inside player like that this season? Talk about scouting it, defending it, and how you can take care of one or the other at the same time?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I think our who league has prepared us. There are teams we play with great post players and great guards that do a good job passing the ball. I think we've been prepared for that. Just understanding how we're going to do that.

We're scouting them, understanding what they do well, just understanding that we're going to have to compete, be ready for 40 minutes, and just pressure them.

ZIA COOKE: I agree, but I also think we just can't focus on them. They have a whole starting five we have to worry about. I think if we get too focused on the main player, we'll let others get off.

So Coach definitely emphasized on that, making sure that we're playing everyone. Everyone that's on the floor is doing their defensive job to stop their team from doing what they usually do.

Q. You had a chance that first year, and the COVID pandemic cut it short. How much did that motivate you -- what was it like during the pandemic? And how did it motivate you once you got the chance to play in

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a tournament three straight years?

ALIYAH BOSTON: The pandemic hit us particularly hard especially since we were doing so well in the season. I think it motivated us because we could never get that year back, but we did want to experience that March Madness, that Final Four, that National Championship.

Since that has happened, it's just something we just continue to work on because we know that is a year we can never get back to experience this.

Q. Obviously you've been on the stage here at the Final Four, but this is you guys' sendoff at the Final Four. Any different feelings about this one, and is there any pressure to go out on top?

ZIA COOKE: I think pressure can either make you or break you. I just want to use the pressure I have in the best way possible to make me go out there and play very hard.

But it definitely is an emotional moment to know this will be our last time to be all together, playing together. We try to keep our emotions to the side and just focus on business right now.

Q. Aliyah and Zia, being that your Coach Dawn Staley has played at the highest level, WNBA, gold medals, the whole nine, what has she taught you about handling the spotlight and making sure you don't let it overwhelm you and your focus on game time play?

ALIYAH BOSTON: Coach is a legend. That's just what she is. For us to be coached by her, it's something truly special.

But just like you said, she's taught us how not to get too high, like you said, or too low, because being balanced is the most important thing. Being able to compartmentalize different aspects of what's happening, but being focused and ready to go when it's time to step on the floor.

ZIA COOKE: Something that Coach always had to tell me is don't get too high with the highs or low with the lows. She just says maintain. That's what I try to do the best I can.

It took me a while to get here, but I finally can maintain.

Q. This program won its first National Championship in this arena when you guys were being recruited. Do you guys remember watching that game at all? How much of an influence did seeing them win that title have on your decision to come to South Carolina?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I definitely remember watching that game. Pretty excited. Thinking about my decision and that game specifically, overall that's what South Carolina is all about. Winning a national title was pretty cool because I knew that I also wanted to do that and play under Coach Staley.

ZIA COOKE: I think after I watched that game, I told my dad, I want to go there. I want to go there.

Of course I had to weigh all my options, but when I saw them win a National Championship, just seeing the type of person that Coach was and the players that she was recruiting, it definitely made me want to come here.

Q. How much of a challenge is Iowa's pace and the speed that they play with?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I think we also like to push pace. We like to get up and down the floor. So I think it could be a fast-based game. I don't think we're going to look at it as a challenge because they like to get up and down the floor because we enjoy doing that as well.

Q. Sticking with the theme of the alumni, that 2017 team, have any of the people or players reached out to you and gave you any advice since they played at this site and won the first National Championship here?

ALIYAH BOSTON: Just telling us to just compete, that's really what it is. Be ready because we're built for the moment.

ZIA COOKE: Same.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies.

Q. So you've talked a lot about as far as investment in the women's game, the women's tournament getting units, maybe breaking off the media rights package. Let's say the NCAA does get more money to invest. In addition to units, what would you like to see them invest in to improve the women's Final Four even more?

DAWN STALEY: You said aside from the units? I think we're moving in the right direction. I thought that being a part of two regional sites and how well that went off, I think the structure was there because that's what the men do. So that was pretty cool.

The units are pretty big. Like that's pretty big because that's the thing that's been weighing us down, meaning it costs a lot to bring all of these teams all around the country



in the tournament, and if we can bring millions into our athletics departments, I think it would help on our campuses.

So it's a long-term effect where, if you're a football player, your experience is probably a lot different than a women's basketball player. We can all agree to that because they're bringing in the money, right? Then if we're bringing in the money, our experience will be a little bit different, and there are things that coaches won't have to fight for. They just happen because you're bringing in some money. You're not seeing the red always. So that's what that would mean.

So it just would elevate the whole student-athlete experience from a women's basketball perspective.

Q. Two completely unrelated questions. What makes Aliyah such a great player? And then the second question is you have been very visible in terms of using your platform. When and why did you decide that was so important? And what kind of message do you think you're giving to your players by being as vocal as you are?

DAWN STALEY: Aliyah is an extraordinary person. So it starts there. She's rooted in her faith. She has an incredibly beautiful family that they get it. They get it. They don't really take themselves too seriously. They got a praying mother, and she's got a great support system.

So Aliyah's allowed to be who she is. She's found herself at a young age because of the foundation that her parents built for her.

And then as far as using my voice, I think I've been asked a lot more questions because of our success. I mean, if you ask me something that people ask me nowadays, 12 years ago, I would probably give you my heart, what was on my heart.

I think the platform has gotten bigger because of our success, and I'm asked a lot more questions. So I try to give people what they ask me from my own experience. It may not be for everyone, but it's from my own experience from being around the game.

Q. You have this outstanding group of seniors who plenty of them will be going to the WNBA. What are they going to be bringing to the teams that get them?

DAWN STALEY: Our players are prepared. They're prepared for the rigors of the challenges of what the WNBA is all about. Whether that's -- I think the biggest thing is they're mentally prepared for whatever a team needs,

whether that's coming off the bench, whether that's being thrown into being a starter, whether that's being able to communicate and pick up things fairly quickly because the league moves very quickly.

So the pace of the league, I don't think they'll have an issue picking up, and if you can pick things up, then you increase your chances of making the team and making an impact.

Q. Dawn, what do you see in the matchup with Caitlin Clark? And along those lines, have you sensed any extra motivation or juice from your players because she's already won a couple of Player of the Year awards? And I'm sure they believe the Player of the Year is on your team.

DAWN STALEY: The juice is in the winning the National Championship. Our players don't really care about anything besides that. So we are -- again, we're strong in our beliefs and what we do and how we've done things.

And at this point, we just want to win, and that's their approach. I love them for that. They're not letting any one thing or any one person distract them from the goal at hand.

Q. When you won the first title that was built with a lot of players from South Carolina, maybe more regionally. Obviously this group comes from all corners of the globe. Talk about branching out. Was it just simply the success that got you on the radar, as maybe Zia and Aliyah alluded to? And what an interesting collection of kids from South America, Canada, and various U.S. states and territories.

DAWN STALEY: I think what's attractive about our program is I think we're just authentic. Whether you like us or not, you can respect where we're coming from.

I know the parents of the players or prospects that I recruit, that we recruit, they know that what we're telling them holds true. From us telling them, and then when they come on the campus, they hear it from other players, they meet other parents. And it's something that you have to want for yourself and for your daughter because it's not easy.

Like coming to South Carolina, it's not an easy thing. It becomes easier when you're able to grasp what we want. Like we want them to be successful individually and collectively. How you get there, it's hard, and it's uncomfortable. But once you're there, you have a pretty good understanding of how it works and how to be successful.

Q. Just curious, what have you learned from any of your previous Final Four runs at South Carolina that you can apply this year, either as you prepare individually or as you prepare your team?

DAWN STALEY: I don't think I can remember. There's just really a lot of stuff that you have to do. So if you don't know that and you're experiencing it for the first time, it's hard because you don't feel like you get enough time to prep, and it's the biggest stage of college women's basketball.

So that's what it is, just prepare for long days and less prep time. But once you're here, you're not going to create any magic. You're not going to create any magic. I do think rest is equally as important as getting out on the floor and working out.

So just the experience of getting back here and knowing and where to focus.

Q. Ticket prices for the women is more than the men on average. There's an undefeated team in you guys, there's Caitlin Clark, Aliyah Boston. It seems like a lot more interesting storylines in the women's Final Four than the men's Final Four. You've been around this is a while. Is it interesting to see the growth in the attention on the games Friday and Sunday instead of Saturday and Monday?

DAWN STALEY: It's great. It's been building towards this for a long time. Fortunately for us -- not just South Carolina, but us as women's basketball -- we've got a lot of star power behind our sport. It increases. You just mentioned two, but you've got Angel Reese. You've got Amoore. You've got Kitley. You've got all these players who have been incredible, just incredible -- creating incredible stories for our game.

I do think you all are telling them, and that's always a great thing.

Q. A couple of unrelated questions. First one, kind of bouncing off of that, people were saying, oh, Dawn should go for the Temple men's basketball job. Did you have any thoughts on that? Obviously you've got a good thing going here in South Carolina.

DAWN STALEY: No thoughts. I don't want to coach in the men's game. It's cold up there too.

Q. Back in your playing days when you were facing a great individual opponent, did you seek out the job of defending that opponent yourself? And inside your

locker room right now, is there kind of a battle about who's going to defend Caitlin?

DAWN STALEY: Did I seek out? I don't know if I -- I think Debbie Ryan just knew. I think she just knew. I think she played off of my competitiveness. So I think I guarded -- maybe Tammi guarded it. I don't know.

But in our locker room, yes, they're super competitive. They all want a chance to guard her. It's going to take all of them probably and more to guard Caitlin. She is someone that is unpredictable, like she'll be able to pivot and take and make incredible shots, both from outside, way outside the three, to at the rim. So we got to show her different looks in order for us to hopefully keep her somewhat under control.

Q. My question for you is obviously there's a lot more growth in the game, which is great to see. How do you feel it's affecting the basketball -- each year is different, right? Can you feel the difference compared to last year, to the extra eyeballs watching on TV, making your players a little more nervous, if they're focusing on that? How do you maintain the same kind of focus and performance that you've been able to as the interest kind of grows?

DAWN STALEY: I'll say this, the people in Columbia, South Carolina, our fans, our local media, they've put us on a big stage for a very long time. So we've created habits to help us deal with situations like this.

Like I don't think our players are going to run from the spotlight. I think they run towards it because they want to win a National Championship. So we've created habits and approaches to big games like this that will keep our nerves under wraps.

For me, I follow their lead.

Q. All year we've kind of heard Caitlin Clark versus Aliyah Boston kind of debate. How important is that debate for the growth of the women's game and to see it unfold on the Final Four stage?

DAWN STALEY: Any time you're able to talk about our game and talk about two young women who have been storylines throughout the season I think is great. I do think some people do cross the line at times because each of their fan bases' favorites? It's been talked about.

I just don't like when people cross the line because our game is pure, it's blossoming. But I guess it's part of sports when people can take jabs at either young people. I just hope they're not looking at it and seeing it because it's not



cool.

Q. What do you remember about that trip to Dallas in 2017 in the Final Four? And how do you think your program has grown, evolved, to be here today going for back to back, third since then?

DAWN STALEY: I love Dallas. Dallas is where we got our first National Championship. I just remember obviously the Dallas police officers, the motorcade. They get us where we need to go. It's super cool seeing that, and it's super cool to experience that again.

I just remember the shot that beat UConn and then having to play -- having an all-SEC National Championship Game. And then us knowing Mississippi State as well as we knew them because we played them two, three weeks before in the SEC tournament championship. I just remember the familiarity of our opponent and knowing that we got a really good shot at winning.

Then our players, although it was really hard to win, they made a mounting comeback. But relieved that we actually won the championship.

Q. Dawn, your players were just talking about the alum from that first championship team, as well as others they have relationships with. What does it mean to you to see your alum continue to pour into the current players and also to see the ripple effect that it has on them to want to continue that?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's cool. Every season is a lot different, but every player that has played in our program, they leave a legacy of leadership that just continues to trickle down to the younger players.

The players that -- the former players that come back, the ones that are in the WNBA, they talk more about the WNBA than they do actually this moment that we're in. I'm happy that they get to hear some of their experiences.

Some of them have got a big decision to make over the next few days. So it's cool that we've got somewhat of a cheat code of having a lot of players in the league to allow them to make an informed decision.

Q. Two questions completely unrelated. Number one, so much is being made of the individual awards, but when we look at Greenville and the MVP and we look at even yesterday what the National Defensive Player of the Year, Aliyah Boston used both occasions to highlight her teammates, L.A. and Brea Beal. Talk about how that attitude, that selflessness has impacted the personality and character of your team.

Also, when it comes to the winning formula for South Carolina, in addition to what we see on the court, the strength and conditioning, the preparation we don't see off the court, how that has played a factor.

DAWN STALEY: Aliyah Boston, there will not be another Aliyah Boston. Her selflessness, her ability to meet moments on the court and off the court, and it's authentic. It's organic. It's genuine. She really means everything that she says out of her mouth. Like she really means it.

So I'm not surprised that she used it in that moment, where she's being recognized and rewarded for the efforts that she's given our team over the past four years, to bestow it on someone else on her team is Aliyah Boston-like.

Then our strength and conditioning coach, they're called performance coaches now, our athletic trainer, I mean, they are the ones that -- when we are our most healthiest, we are our most successful, and a lot has to do with Molly Binetti and Craig Oates. And they get along. I do think they go out drinking too at times.

But they have built a relationship to where they work well together. They bookend our players into getting their mind, body, and souls in a place where they have to get up to practice, like we practice every single day. So they have a lot to do with that because as coaches we're not a part of that. The performance coach and the trainer are joined at the hip to make sure that our players are in a great position to perform every single day.

So to be at the Final Four, to prep for the semifinals game tomorrow, a lot of credit has to go to them in making sure that our players are ready to rock and roll.

Q. We're the same age, so I have followed your career from the time you played at Virginia, and I've always wanted to ask you about great teams you were on with Tammi and Heidi, not winning at all, has that fueled you in terms of your success? Because you've won everywhere since at all levels as a player and a coach.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it used to fuel me when we hadn't won. Now I think basketball has a strange of just looking out, like looking out for the people who really do it for the purity of it. Like I just, I love basketball. I love what I do. And I do think I'm favored. Like God's favor has shined bright on my career.

But, no, I'm not driven by it anymore. But it was one of my lifelong dreams as a child growing up in North Philly in the projects. I only saw women play two times on television: That was the Olympics, and that was the National Championship Game. That was the driving force in me

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wanting to accomplish that because at that time that was the biggest -- it's probably still the biggest thing besides playing in the league.

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