

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

Friday, March 31, 2023

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Center

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Aliyah Boston

Raven Johnson

Semi-Finals Postgame Media Conference



Like if you had won another title, were you gone for sure, or had you not actually decided?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I mean, this decision is a big decision. I was going to have to really write down the pros and cons of everything. Whether we won or not, it would still have to be something that I would have to consider.

Q. Aliyah, that last three that Clark shot, she misses it. You guys weren't able to corral the rebound. Was that more a matter of positioning than anything else on that play?

ALIYAH BOSTON: That was a long shot and a long rebound. Those can be really hard just based on how hard that came off the backboard, and that shot ricocheted off the backboard. It was really high, and we just weren't in the position to get it.

Q. Raven, for you, this was your first Final Four game that you've been able to play in. What was that experience like for you?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It was good just being out there. We didn't come out with the outcome. I really wanted to win for the seniors, but yeah, I have more years to come. So we're definitely going to be back.

Q. Aliyah and Raven, one for each of you: Raven, you have saved your biggest games this year for the biggest opponents -- tonight, LSU, and Utah are your three double-figure games. Can you talk about what you've brought to those matchups? Aliyah, if you could talk a little bit about what you see out of Raven in those moments.

RAVEN JOHNSON: I'll start with Aliyah and the freshy class, the way they talk to me and show me what leadership is and show me what pro habits is every day. I cherish that every day. And just Aliyah being in my ear gives me confidence.

Also, there's not a day that Coach Staley isn't in my ear, and she also helps me with confidence.

Iowa - 77, South Carolina - 73

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the NCAA semifinal press conference. You'll hear an opening statement from Coach Staley and then we'll have questions for the student-athletes.

DAWN STALEY: Congratulations to Iowa. Played a tough game. Man, I just think Dallas put on a good show when it comes to the Final Four. Special shoutout to the police officers who did a great job moving us around the city.

Q. Aliyah, what were they doing to you that maybe you haven't seen other teams do before? And you could come back for a fifth year because of COVID, and I'm just wondering what your plans are going to be for next year.

ALIYAH BOSTON: I'll start with that one. Haven't decided as yet.

I don't really think they were doing anything different. I think they were just being very physical. I think part of that -- I feel like every time teams get ready to play us, there's always that agenda of we are so physical. We can take all the aggression. So I think that that was being let go a lot, but I don't think it was anything different. I think it was just a very physical game.

Q. Aliyah, obviously this is really disappointing and frustrating to end the season like this, but you do have an opportunity to write a different ending because you do have a fifth year. When you said just now that you hadn't decided, did this game put that in the balance?

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ALIYAH BOSTON: After the game I told Raven, this is your team. You've been in the system for two years now. Next year, people are going to look to you for that leadership role. Just giving her the guidance of how to do it. This year I think she's been really listening to us, and you can see that during the games.

For the big games, Raven is always ready. She does a great job of trying to pass the ball, making other people open, making other people feel included. Tonight she stepped up. She hit some really big threes for us. Did a great job running the point position when Coach had her in.

I think she just steps up. That's just who she is. Next year is going to be really exciting when she's in that full role and really leading the team.

Q. For both of you, that moment the buzzer goes off, what's going through your head? Aliyah, I think I saw from where I was sitting, you kind of consoling Zia or talking to her post-game. If you are comfortable sharing kind of what you told her or what that moment was like for you as well.

ALIYAH BOSTON: When that buzzer went off, it was kind of just an end of an era, it feels like. We had a special group, and that's kind of what it felt like.

Zia competed for 40 minutes. She played every single minute of this game. She gave it her all. And I just told her, you can't hang your head low because you did really good. You kept us in this game.

Went out with foul trouble, Zia kept attacking. She hit big shots. She worked really hard. Four years went by really fast, but I told her no matter she does next, she's ready for it. God has equipped her, and she's ready.

Q. Aliyah, this game tonight marked the last two Players of the Year. Do you think you guys gained more fans --

ALIYAH BOSTON: I mean, I hope I gained some fans. But I mean, I definitely think so. I think this game just grew with basketball. I bet a lot of people were watching. You could hear Iowa fans and our fans.

Everybody was just really excited for this game. It was a great game. But I mean, I hope so.

Q. For either of you, now that it's over, now that you have the whole kind of season behind you, what are you going to remember most about this year and playing with this particular team, with the whole thing in the rearview mirror?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I'm going to remember a fun year. I think we had so many great experiences, just winning -- how many games was that? 36 games. Like I feel like that's unbelievable.

Coach told us in the locker room, she was like this is rare. Teams can't say they did that. Even though this didn't end the way we wanted it to, those 36 games prior to this was really good.

Q. This is for both of you guys: How has Coach Staley and her background and her philosophies, how has that shaped you guys as players and as people? How will you take that forward?

RAVEN JOHNSON: In my eyes, I don't want to make a mistake when Coach Staley is coaching. I always look at her like oh, Lord. She scares me honestly because I want to be so perfect to her.

Honestly, you can't be perfect. Coach always say that, just be yourself. There's thing she asks me in practice. I'm like, I don't know. I'm thinking, why would she ask me that? Stuff like that.

Honestly, I'm glad I'm playing under her because I'm definitely going to develop really well under her.

ALIYAH BOSTON: Playing under Coach Staley, she's helped me with my confidence a lot. She's always been that second mom, no matter what. (Crying).

You guys are lucky here. You get to see me cry. I was planning not to cry.

RAVEN JOHNSON: No pictures, please.

ALIYAH BOSTON: Because they like to run wild with those. I better not see one.

Honestly, she's just been a great, like a second mom. And on the court, she just motivates you. She always pushes you to be the best person that you can be. You don't have to be perfect, even though, Raven, you don't have to be perfect. She knows that you make mistakes.

But I think she just helps you every step of the way. She asks you questions if you don't know. She goes into more detail. She wants to see you succeed, so yeah.

Seriously, no pictures.

Q. Aliyah, to come into this game unbeaten, do you think that added any pressure or anything extra in the



fact that you guys haven't lost a game this season and had a 42-game winning streak? Does that add anything when you come into this atmosphere?

ALIYAH BOSTON: I think the only pressure is you want to go to a National Championship Game. You want to compete for that. We were undefeated, but we kind of had to push that to the back burner because, just like you said, we're in the season where you don't want to lose.

We weren't really focused on our streak or how long we've been undefeated. It was really just about how we want to compete to go to the next step.

Q. Aliyah, you guys did many of the things you always do -- you dominated the bench, the offensive rebounding. What did you see the difference was?

ALIYAH BOSTON: Where did I see the difference? I think just some of our shots didn't fall tonight. I feel like sometimes we were able to put them on the free-throw line, and that really wasn't going both ways. But our shots just didn't really fall.

Q. Just reflecting on the season, what is something, the biggest thing that each of y'all learned this season?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Leadership role. Definitely from the freshy class, leadership role. They always showed me what pro habits are, and they showed me every day what it's like to be a pro. The way they talked to us younger players and motivated us, I really cherish that. I'm definitely going to take pride in that.

ALIYAH BOSTON: For me, definitely turning the page a lot quicker. Don't hang my head too low on something specific. Just turn the page and get to the next thing.

Q. Can you guys, can both of you guys talk about what it was like to be coached by Dawn Staley?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Like I said, I wanted to be -- like in her eyes, I want to be perfect. I never want to make a mistake. I'm learning her more and more, like she's learning me more and more.

She's asking me questions, and I always thought, why does she ask me this? I want to be like her one day. I look up to her, little does she know. So I'm definitely going to talk to Coach and watch film definitely on this game so I can learn. Like I said, we're going to be back.

ALIYAH BOSTON: I just learned to turn the page, compete for 40 minutes, and just continue to be a great

teammate. Coach, do you think I became a better passer this year? All right. That was my goal.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much, ladies. Congratulations on a great season.

We'll open it up for questions for Coach Staley.

Q. We just heard Aliyah talk so much about her teammates through this entire thing. What does that say about not just the person she is on the court, but off it too?

DAWN STALEY: She's a complete person. Like she's a great human being. You could tell that she's got great parenting and a great foundation that she shares herself, like she's a sacrificer. She's a great friend. She's a great teammate.

She is somebody that you want to build your program around that you know is safe. She's always going to make the right decision for our team, even if it is a detriment to her personally.

Q. If Aliyah does ask you for your opinion about what you should do next year, what will you tell her? If this was her last game at South Carolina, can you describe what she has meant to your program?

DAWN STALEY: I'm going to tell her to go. There are defenses that are played against her that won't allow her to play her game. And then it's hard to officiate that. It's hard to officiate that.

So I would tell her to go. She's great. She's ready. She's ready to see single coverage. She's ready to make the next step to the league.

I mean, she's meant everything to our program. She has been the cornerstone of our program for the past four years. She elevated us. She raised the standard of how to approach basketball. She's never had a bad day.

She's never come into practice sulking. She's always just the person that you saw, so very, very consistent. I slept very well knowing she was with our program, and I'll sleep well knowing that she's okay and she will definitely make her mark at the next level.

Q. Coach, we talked earlier when you guys played Stanford and Aliyah was dealing with foul trouble. And I asked, did you have to say anything to her? So in this case with zero points at halftime, did you have to say anything to her to get her going?



DAWN STALEY: No. She knows how to handle foul trouble. She knows what needs to get done. Again, it's just hard to -- it's hard for her to move. I think it's hard for -- it's hard to officiate the way the game was played. It's just hard to officiate.

When she's 2-for-9, you know, two fouls in the first couple minutes of the first quarter, it's hard. She's a big part of what we do.

Q. A lot of times other coaches, your colleagues have sat in that spot and talked about you all being bullies. What's the truth about your team?

DAWN STALEY: The truth about our team? That's a good question. We're not bar fighters. We're not thugs. We're not monkeys. We're not street fighters.

This team exemplifies how you need to approach basketball on the court and off the court. And I do think that that's sometimes brought into the game, and it hurts. And I do think that some of -- I'm going to say it because I said I was going to say it whether we lost or whether we won: Some of the people in the media, when you're gathering in public, you're saying things about our team, and you're being heard, and it's being brought back to me. And these are the people that write nationally for our sport.

So you can not like our team and you can not like me. But when you say things that you probably should be saying in your home on the phone or texting out in public and you're being heard, and you are a national writer for our sport, it just confirms what we already know. So watch what you say when you're in public and you're talking about my team in particular.

Just watch what you say about our team because it's wrong. You've got young lives who are really -- if you really knew them, if you really knew them, like you really want to know other players that represent this game, you would think differently. So don't judge us by the color of our skin. Judge us by how we approach the game.

And you may not like how we play the game, you may not like it, that's the way we play. That's the way I coach. I'm not changing. We found success in it, and maybe some days like today, we end up on the losing side of the stick. But guess what? We live to see another day. We live to see the comeback next year and try to do this again because I'm not changing.

I'm not changing, but I hear you. I hear you. I hear you because I do have friends in the media. Whether you believe it or not, I do have some friends in the media.

So those of you who were at whatever event you were at that was nearby this arena yesterday, you were heard. You were overheard talking about our team.

Q. To talk about Raven a little bit and just -- I know we talked after UConn, and there was a time where she stepped forward. I wonder whether you think her ability to do that then helped her prepare for what she did tonight and just generally speaking how you see her as a potential leader for this team going forward?

DAWN STALEY: Raven is our future. Raven has a bright future. She's got some great instincts as a point guard, and she just mentioned, I ask her sometimes why? Why did you do that? And I ask why because I like to know her process. I like to know what she's thinking, and it helps me teach her a little bit better.

She doesn't know why because she's got really, really, really good instincts. So when she's able to keep those instincts the way they are but also just be a little bit more patient about seeing other options, she's going to be a terrific point guard.

So she's a pro in the making, and I'm super proud that she's on our team and she's going to represent our team and our university.

Q. Dawn, you talked the other day a lot about your faith. So in this moment, I want to ask, what is it that you would say to the kids back in South Carolina about -- I've heard you say many times what God has for you is for you, right? What would you say to them about overcoming disappointments like this? To use that setback as a setup for what's ahead in the future?

DAWN STALEY: I just don't give honor to God when we win. Obviously we want to win all the games. He's the reason for all seasons, you know. It's not harvest time yet. It's not harvest time. So I take the good with the bad.

I'm a sore loser, but I'm a gracious loser. I'm going to give credit where credit is due. Iowa had a terrific game plan, and we didn't get it done. There were opportunities -- there were three turnovers we had in a row that were somewhat of a game changer for us that, if we had them back, we could probably open up a lead that would have put us over the top. But it wasn't in the cards.

We did that to other teams, and we ended up winning. So we've got to take the good with the bad. I'm never going to turn my back on the game of basketball. It's just given too much to me. I'm still favored, still favored.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about Caitlin? Obviously



you watched a ton of film of her to prep for this game. Was she better than you anticipated in person?

DAWN STALEY: No, she was on point. I mean, she was everything that we saw on film. She was everything, like assists, points, turnovers, all of them. She ran the gamut of who she is as a player, and she threaded the needle.

Czinano, I thought she had a great connection with her, and if we could have probably allowed Czinano to have a little less opportunities, it could have flipped the other way. She was the one that put them over the top with her contributions, because we had everybody else in check.

Q. A lot of people tonight that I know told me they were watching this game who don't watch women's basketball a lot. You guys didn't come out on the end you wanted, but what do you hope you guys showed the country and maybe people who were watching women's basketball who don't watch it a lot tonight?

DAWN STALEY: I hope they saw some individual performances that will bring them back. I hope they saw the grittiness of a team that was undefeated, and I hope they want to learn a lot more about, not just us, LSU and what Kim Mulkey has done this season and getting to a National Championship Game.

I mean, there was a lot. Virginia Tech and Kenny Brooks and his first time being in the Final Four. And then just the entire tournament. We didn't have all No. 1 seeds here, and I hope they ask why. And they'll find out we had some incredible, exciting games that led to not everyone, the No. 1 seed being here.

Q. Coach, how do you think your players handled the pressure of going undefeated all the way up till tonight and then the performance you guys showed to everybody tonight?

DAWN STALEY: I don't think we felt pressure to win the game. I thought we approached it, it felt like any other game. We just didn't perform. We didn't make more plays than we needed to make, especially down the stretch. That hasn't been us all season long.

But I never -- I don't think our players felt pressure, any other pressure besides wanting to win another basketball game.

Q. To have a group of players who have experienced losing so rarely, does it change kind of how you have to coach them through a loss compared to some of those earlier teams you had in your tenure at South Carolina?

DAWN STALEY: This is kind of unique because seven of them have a -- two of the seven, the decision's made for them. Five out of seven of our seniors and graduate assistants, they have a decision to make. So it's less about this loss and more about what's next and making a decision on what's next for them.

But the returners, I mean, they got to get us back here. This is fun to come to the Final Four as a participant. It's fun. I don't like coming other than coming as a participant, and I didn't really have to think about that for three years.

So let's hope we can get back here, and I hope the loss, they felt it deeply, and they'll work hard to get back here.

Q. I was here when you were last here in Dallas. I wanted to know, first, does it feel different when you walked in to see how much women's basketball has changed? And in that time you've been able to redefine culture for women's basketball and for your team. How do you keep them motivated for the upcoming year?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, to win a National Championship is always an incredible goal, and it's cool just trying to -- it's cool just trying to get a team, a new team, what makes that team unique about working hard and getting back to this place. So I'm looking forward to that.

We're not going to have the same team. We're going to have a different team that have different characteristics, that have different players. They're going to be put in positions that will fill a void that's going to be left by some of our seniors. So I look forward to that challenge.

Q. So you mentioned earlier your philosophy in coaching and leading women. How much of that is informed by like growing up in North Philly, playing in the developmental basketball league and in the pub league?

DAWN STALEY: It's my foundation. I grew up in the projects in North Philly. You pretty much had to fight for everything, every single thing. And I don't really take anything for granted. I don't really like handouts. So everything that we do, we have to work for.

That is the mentality that I try to instill in our players, and to be disciplined in that. I had a mother who was a disciplinarian, so I don't know any other way besides just doing things the right way and doing things the way she wanted things done.

I'm probably a little more lenient than my mom with our

players because I want to meet them where they are and help them go where their hearts desire to go.

Q. Just a question about the defensive strategy on Caitlin. What was it that you guys were trying to do? In the game, did you ever consider anything like maybe double-teaming her to get the ball out of her hands or anything just to change things up with her?

DAWN STALEY: She was just so well equipped with passing the basketball. I thought we had a couple of miscommunications. And then when you're playing a player like Caitlin, you kind of lose your spacing out there, and you lose who's good where.

So like any time she's at the high post, we didn't want to play her at the high post. We wanted to clog the middle up a little bit and beat her to the spot of rolling deep on us. We found ourselves a little high on that at times.

At the end of the game, we were going to trap on the ball screen, but they didn't come off the ball screen. We put a lot of different people on her. I thought we tried to tire her out a little bit for four quarters by having our point guards pressure her.

I thought she tired out just a little bit, but not enough to give us an edge.

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