

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

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Wes Moore

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



RICK NIXON: This is Rick Nixon with the NCAA. I'll ask Coach to provide an opening statement, then we'll go to your questions and answers. Coach, if you would, a quick opening statement, then we'll start taking some questions.

WES MOORE: Yeah, just excited to still be playing. This is an unbelievable experience. This is my 35th year as a head coach. What a way to peak out here.

Just so proud of our team, all they've been able to overcome and accomplish. A lot of doubters. They kept believing. It's been a fun ride.

I think that's the biggest message I've been giving 'em. I think they felt it, too. We don't want it to end. We're enjoying the season, having fun together on the court, off the court. Just want to keep it riding.

We're really excited about coming to Cleveland and playing again.

RICK NIXON: Thank you, Coach. With that, the first question...

Q. Wes, you've been doing this a very long time. When the realization sets in, that you've done it, you're going to make the Final Four, describe that feeling. How long did it take before you looked around, I got to get ready for South Carolina?

WES MOORE: What a wake-up call (smiling).

Again, I mean, this is your dream as a player, as a coach. Every year you start the season with this goal in mind. Only four teams make it.

Let's face it, a lot of times it's the same three or four teams. But it's just amazing. I'm so happy for our players to be

able to experience this. They've worked so hard.

But a lot of things came to mind. Two years ago we were a double-overtime loss away from going to the Final Four. I thought of those players, how much I love them, how great they were. I just hate they missed out on this opportunity.

I thought about Kay Yow, 34 years at NC State. I was fortunate to be with her from '93 to '95. She took this program to a Final Four in '98. To be able to do that, as well.

I even thought about you a little bit, Rob, because you had said recently, I think, that you believed that we would get to the Final Four at some point in my time here. So that's amazing. You maybe had more confidence than I did (smiling).

Anyway, just a lot of things. Yeah, it's very humbling. The text messages you receive from all these great coaches and friends and people you care about, it's very humbling and at the same time very exciting.

Yeah, started watching film actually on the plane ride home. Clipped one of South Carolina's games. I think this is the best team -- and they've had some unbelievable teams. I think this is the best team they've ever had simply because I think they've got so many people that can score the ball. They've got so many really good shooters that you can't sit down on Cardoso and collapse on her because they got a lot of people that can knock down threes around her. Even as great a player as she is, you also got to be concerned about the others.

It's a great challenge. Dawn Staley has been here many times, unbelievable coach. Like I said, we're excited about playing again. Wouldn't trade it for anything. So here we go.

Q. What does it mean to you to see women's basketball growing in the right direction?

WES MOORE: Well, I think it's been going in the right direction, but now it's exploding, you know? It's awesome. Got so many unbelievable players. The game is elevated

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so much. The fan interest obviously has gone with it.

I think there's a little bit more parity than we've had in the past maybe because of the portal. But I just think it's a great time. We've seen the TV ratings just go through the roof. Competing with the pros, just everyone. It's pretty amazing to be a part of it. I'm just very thankful and feel like we're blessed.

But again, you owe it all to the players. It's all about the product, the entertainment. Those players are giving us some great entertainment.

Q. Wes, between you and the men's team, you have a combined nine out of ten starters that are from the transfer portal. The only one being Aziaha James for you guys. What has it shown about what you have been able to do that you're able to adapt to this new look in college basketball and being able to thrive in the transfer portal era, as well?

WES MOORE: Yeah, I mean, again, it is what it is. I never really recruited junior college a lot because I love bringing freshmen in and watching them develop over a four-year period, watch 'em grow as a player, as a young lady. Just watching them grow up before your eyes is pretty exciting.

We've got some of that now. We've got several freshmen that are contributing and are a big part of it.

But no doubt, I think the big thing for us, the young ladies we have that are starting for us out of the transfer portal, they've at least been here multiple years now. So they've been in the program, they've had a chance to grow as an individual player and develop. They've also had a chance to come together as a team. I think that's part of our strength right now.

So it is what it is. You got to try to keep up with everyone else and fill spots. We're just very blessed to have so many great players. Again, at least they've been here two or three years and have grown. We feel like they've been here the entire time. Don't really look at them as transfers now. They're family.

Q. This is the first time we've been able to talk to you since both teams advanced to the Final Four. What does it mean to be part of a program, only the 11th program in NCAA history, to send both teams to the Final Four?

WES MOORE: Yeah, that's awesome. I was fortunate. I had an opportunity to go up to D.C. We had that week off, weren't sure who we were playing or anything. It was a little bit quieter time. Had an opportunity to go up to the

ACC championship game, see Coach Keatts.

He is an unbelievable man, so good with those players, but also an unbelievable coach. To see all that come together and start clicking when it counted was, like I said, one of the most enjoyable things I've ever been a part of to see.

It's great. Our players all I think get along. They share the same journey. So it's been fun watching them interact, cheer for each other. Like I said, Coach Keatts and I, I think we have a special bond because we both now how hard this is.

Starting in the ACC, you have 14 other unbelievable universities and teams. Here you're trying to be the top one. It's not easy. So ups and downs during the season. We try to talk or text almost every day. Like I said, it's special to share that with him and to see them doing so well.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the Final Four in general. Obviously all four teams have great players. It seems like the women's game, you've got so many stars now. Your two guards, can you discuss the development you've seen from Saniya and Aziaha, what they kind of give you going into this Final Four.

WES MOORE: I've seen them both grow up as players, as people. I think both of them at times, if things didn't go well, they would be hard on themselves, blame themselves, whatever, get down.

I think now maybe just knowing that we're really counting on them, they're going to be able to play through mistakes, they know worry going to lean on 'em. I think that's given them confidence.

I know both of them worked their tails off during the summer to grow their games. I think that's paid off and given them confidence, as well.

Just to see them go from maybe two years ago having some self doubt, hesitation, and now you can't hold 'em back (smiling). They've got a lot of confidence and they're having fun. That's what it's about.

Q. I know sometimes looking at you on the sidelines, it seems like you can't have them play fast enough, yelling, Go, go, go. Is that a change for you? When they do get going with their pace, how much can that impact a game?

WES MOORE: Yeah, we've always been a four out, one in. And we want to get paint touches, and we want to get the ball inside. River Baldwin I thought really took the

game over against Texas on Sunday in the fourth quarter, I think scored 14 points maybe in that final quarter.

It's great having that balance.

Zia scored, what, 27 I think. She had 20 in a half. River had 14 in a quarter. I look at the stat sheet afterward, we've still got five people in double figures, which is pretty neat.

Yes, with Saniya and Aziaha, you want to go, you want to run, give them an opportunity maybe in transition to have some one-on-ones and space to work in.

Again, we got to be smart enough to realize when the defense is back and they clog the lane up, we got to downshift and swing the ball, try to get some movement going.

There are times when I just want to say, Hey, I like this matchup, let's get everybody out of the way, let Saniya or Aziaha go to work.

I'd add Zoe Brooks into that mix, too. A similar type player. As a freshman she's grown a lot. To have all three of them on the court at times, you better not be touching the brake. Let it go (smiling).

Q. You have taken down a 1 and an 2, are viewed as a little bit of a party crasher here. Is that okay with you, being a little bit under the radar?

WES MOORE: Hey, we're coming to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, you got to crash the party, right (smiling)?

Again, I look at that gauntlet -- Tennessee, Stanford, Texas -- that's some pretty strong programs with a lot of history.

I noticed I guess at least the last two games, we've been given like a 20-something percent chance of winning. I think for this game, we don't have any percent chance, but I know it's going to be pretty low again.

Again, they're playing and having fun. We're not worried about it. Like I said, I think this is your goal, to get to the Final Four. But now you got to excel and say, Okay, now our goal is to try to get two more.

I think we'll get back on the court a little bit today and start refocusing. There will be plenty of time to celebrate later. Yeah, it's an unbelievable experience. I can't wait to get to Cleveland, that's for sure.

Q. 40-plus years ago, NC State men took down an undefeated team. Will you lean into that a little bit with

the girls, talk to them about NC State and its history?

WES MOORE: I don't know. I hate to disappoint everyone and probably disappoint my players sometimes. I'm not Jim Valvano in that respect. I've heard his players tell me that when he was done speaking to them, they didn't want to open the door, they wanted to run through it.

I'm more maybe matter of fact. We've just, like I said, bought into the idea. We don't want it to end. We're having fun. We want to keep going. So we'll do that.

We have talked about, we're always the underdog. We were picked eighth in the ACC. We were unranked when the season started. More Rodney Dangerfield. We just don't get any respect (smiling).

That's okay. We're having fun. We're excited about playing again. So it's all good.

Q. Coach, when you guys got back from Portland, it was almost 3 a.m., but there was still a big crowd of fans there to greet you. What did that moment mean to you, seeing everyone there?

WES MOORE: It's unbelievable. That was the thing, our fans, they are so rabid, they're so loyal. I want to win for them. I'll be honest with you. That's part of it. I think we all do. We want those people to have something to celebrate. Right now they're getting a double dose of celebrating.

I talked to our A.D., Boo, and he was in Dallas at the men's game. He was saying that if he let them, he'd be drinking 80-something beers a day because everybody he ran into wanted to buy him a beer. He had to say, No, no, I can't do that.

Our fans are kind of blue-collar, hardworking. We want to be the same way. It means a lot to be able to give them something to celebrate, to be able to maybe even brag a little bit. Nothing wrong with that.

Q. Just curious how NC State is maximizing with both its men's and women's team in the Final Four, how you plan to just maximize your brand?

WES MOORE: I'm sorry, maximizing what?

Q. Your name recognition.

WES MOORE: Oh, yeah. That's exciting, too. Sometimes maybe we don't get the attention over here that we would like nationally. For us and the men to both be in it...

I grew up in Dallas. I listened to the Dallas sports talk all the time to keep up with my world champion Texas Rangers, even the Cowboys, even though we've had a dry spell. I bet three or four different days they've mentioned on the Dallas radio about how the Dallas Cowboys need to draft DJ Burns in the seventh round and make a lineman out of him.

Yeah, we're definitely getting a lot more exposure. I think our players, their talent level but also their personalities, make it fun, make people really attract to them. It's been crazy to see all the attention. Hopefully that's something Coach Keatts and I, Coach Doeren in football, everybody else, Coach Avent in baseball, I hope we all can take advantage of it in the recruiting, as well.

Q. We understand this is the second Final Four appearance, first one in 1998. You were in the Final Four at the Division II level. What do you remember from that event and your personal growth as a coach from that Final Four at that level all the way to now?

WES MOORE: Yeah, first of all, as far as the '98 program at NC State, I was here '93 to '95. Those players that were seniors in '98, I actually was here their freshman year and was able to work with them some and be around them.

We take a lot of pride in that group. In fact, this year we recognized -- maybe a year ago we recognized 'em for their anniversary year, 25 years. They're around a lot. It's pretty awesome to share that with them because we all feel like, even though we're 25 years separated, we feel like we're all family.

Francis Marion, it was awesome, too. Division II, Division I, but to go to Final Four at Francis Marion was a thrill as well. I still talk with some of those players, have a lot of great memories with them.

I've been very blessed everywhere I've been to have unbelievable players to work with, unbelievable young ladies. A lot of that goes to their parents for preparing them to opportunities like this.

Yeah, it's been a long time coming for this one, so I'm really excited about it. Yeah, I'm proud of those other teams, as well.

Q. Obviously you got two more games to go, you have work to do.

WES MOORE: We hope. We hope (smiling).

Q. In your mind you want to play two more games. If you could say back from the renovation of Reynolds to

now, seems like there's been three tiers of players, to all the people that have contributed to this moment, if you could speak to them and the fans, what would you say to them?

WES MOORE: I think about my first few years, the young ladies we had there. My first year here, expectations were so low, but I felt like we had some talent. I felt like we had some seniors that were hungry.

So that first year, those kids... They hadn't heard any of my stories. I hadn't worn on 'em yet. It was just a fun year. We won 25 games and went to the tournament and all that.

Then we had the group that obviously went to the Elite 8 a couple years ago. Most of those players had been in our program for five years due to COVID, so they had grown. When they came in, they weren't top 50. Heck, most of them weren't even top hundred recruits. Probably Elissa Cunane was the highest ranked. She was 55th in the ESPN rankings.

They stayed here, first of all. There was no portal then. They stayed here, worked hard, got better individually, got better as a team. Like I said, we went up to Connecticut and double-overtime loss away from going to the Final Four. So I think about that group, as you mentioned.

Now this group. Again, several of 'em came from the portal, but they all have been here multiple years, those ones that are starting and all.

So special group. Again, from where we started even a year ago, the disappointment at the end of the season a year ago to now is just amazing. Like I said, I'm happy for those players. I'm happy for our fans.

It's a special time obviously. Memories that will last you a lifetime.

Q. You've been focused on the Gamecocks, but you were watching the ballgames last night. Your impressions on what Caitlin Clark was able to do?

WES MOORE: I hate to admit it, y'all. I was here watching film in the office. Actually my wife had it on when I walked in the door. I saw the last minute.

But I've seen the highlights. I saw her up close and personal last year. We were fortunate. We went to Iowa a year ago and won. We held Caitlin Clark to 45. I can't believe I didn't have coaches calling me last year for my scouting report in the NCAA tournament.

She is amazing. People asked me in the postgame press conference after we won, Do you think Caitlin Clark shot too much? Something to that effect. Maybe took some tough shots?

Are you kidding me? If you're hitting over 50% of your shots, I don't care where you shoot, how often you shoot, keep shooting.

She was. She crossed halfcourt, she was open. She is truly amazing. There's a lot of amazing players in this Final Four. Like I said, South Carolina is loaded with them, too. But it's pretty special to be a part of.

Yeah, Caitlin Clark is someone that has definitely made such a great impact on our game. I bet ticket prices for the Final Four doubled last night. If you had some at face value, they might be a lot more valuable.

RICK NIXON: Coach Moore, we appreciate your time today. Thank you so much.

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