

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

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Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



DAWN STALEY: We're excited, obviously, to be here and play in the third week in the NCAA Tournament. I mean, our players have been as resilient as they could be to put us in this situation, and I'm sure they're excited to be here but also want to finish the task at hand.

Q. The other day they had a side by side of the broadcast with you and MiLaysia, your college days and her driving to the basket, et cetera. Could you speak about the similarities you see in her as a player to you both on and off the court?

DAWN STALEY: MiLaysia is probably a lot more athletic than I was. I think we're both fearless when it comes to playing on both sides of the basketball.

I was a high-risk/high-reward type of player until I got a little bit older and understood and valued the basketball. MiLaysia is probably pretty similar to me in my freshman year where I think I averaged five turnovers. She takes care of the ball a little bit more than that. But she's very unselfish, very creative with the basketball, much more than I have ever been. So when it comes to the edge of being a generational talent, she edges me out by far.

Q. I want to know how do you feel about the women's basketball that it's such on a major platform now, what are your feelings about that? To me, I guess what I'm trying to say is the NCAA Tournament, the Women's NCAA Tournament, is kind of like up on a level with the men's now. How do you feel about that?

DAWN STALEY: I feel our game is growing and growing and continues to grow. I think a lot of it has to do with us being treated like a sport now. When you treat us like a sport, you will get a return on your investment. Women's basketball is in high demand. People want to see it. People want to see it live, and people want to see it across

the airways.

Because of that, I do think the decision makers of our sport is recognizing that, and they're giving full access to not just one team or two teams, full access to our entire sport, and people are loving that access and seeing the very talented individuals that we have in our game.

Q. You've got three players on this roster, Chloe, Ashlyn, Sania, were at the Final Four last year, didn't get a chance to play in that game. How excited are you for those three to get out there, how hungry do you think they are to finally get a chance to play on this stage?

DAWN STALEY: Those three, we need them. We need them to play. We need them to play well, and we need them just to be who they've been all season long.

So I'm excited for them. I'm excited for their opportunity because they did sit and sit a long time last year and now when they're given the opportunity or earned the opportunity to play, they are certainly showcasing their talents, and they put us in a position of being here at the Final Four. I'm excited for them and their families.

Q. I'm just curious, with this team, all the time you've been with them, going back to the start of the season or over the summer, what's something you've learned about this group?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I mean, something I learned about this group is they make you adhere to your own words. And for me, my own words is my own words would be to trust the process. Trust the process. I don't know if I trusted the process very early on in the summer because the process, there wasn't a process. It was more of just trying to fight for the culture and the chemistry we built over the past probably seven to eight years.

And they came in so different than any of our teams that I just didn't see -- it was a hard starting point. Where do you start with a team that is young but they're probably feeling themselves a little bit because we've had success, and feeling themselves a little bit because they finally will get



an opportunity to play.

But they didn't really understand at the time what it took in June, like in June, you have to prep in June for April. And before prepping in June, you prep in May. You prep in April and May for June so your June is better. So your August is better. So your December is better. And they just weren't prepared for June. And I was not prepared for them to not be prepared for June.

So part of me was fighting our culture and where we were as a program and then part of me learned how to trust their process, and once I did, things got a little bit easier because you just have to -- you can't start from where we lost in the Final Four. You have to start this year with a new group over, wipe the slate clean, allow them to figure out what their identity will be, both on and off the court, and ride the wave a little bit, but also don't ever sacrifice our core value.

There are things that I won't fight. But core value things I will fight.

Q. Not to compare your appearances here, but has that made this appearance particularly gratifying because of all that?

DAWN STALEY: I'm shocked. I'm shocked. I'm shocked. They came to my room in the hotel -- and it's a big room. It's a big room. It's lavish. They wanted to see what it looks like. They're all in there and I'm like, thank you, thank you, thank you. I said thank you for this big room, but most importantly getting us here to the Final Four to experience this.

I never want to not show my gratitude for our players and the hard work that they put in, but I'm shocked. I'm shocked that we're undefeated. I'm shocked that we're here at the Final Four competing for a national championship. But I'm going to tell you this, our coaching staff put in a lot of work. And sometimes when you put the work in, it's returned in this fashion, and it's caught us off guard, but I'm super happy for our players because they started from the bottom and then they're here.

Q. Your leadership and experience have been instrumental in the guiding force to take your team to the Final Four. What do you see are the key factors that would allow your team to advance to the championship game?

DAWN STALEY: Any team that's here at the Final Four created some good habits that got them here. We have to adhere and play to the habits that we've created on both sides of the basketball and beat the great North Carolina

State team. They're much deserving of being here. They are 1 of 4 teams that are here. They're good.

Our habits. Our habits. We certainly have -- if you look at their roster and look at our roster -- we do have an advantage in the paint with our bigs that we must exploit at some point in a lot of periods throughout the game.

Q. What is your message to your players and how to keep them focused?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, they're focused. At this stage of the game our practices are lean. They're not long. We go over certain things, two or three things. They execute it. They're locked in. They hold each other accountable.

So I mean, we're creatures of habit like we've been all season long.

Q. When you play NC State, you're going to see a friendly face in Saniya. There's got to be some pride there watching her develop. I know you probably wish she would have stayed, but watching her develop into the kind of player she has already, and do you talk with Breezy and Raven and Feagin about, hey, this is your friend we're playing against but we still have a job to do?

DAWN STALEY: I'm super proud of Rivers. I often text with her and her parents. I texted them yesterday or two days ago when they won and they found themselves in the Final Four.

I mean, I say this often, once you're a part of our family, whether you stay or whether you transfer, I mean, you're always going to have me as a resource. You're always going to have me as someone that wants you to do extremely well. And I'm proud of Rivers. I really am. Obviously we knew she was a tremendous player.

And it's unfortunate that her talents aren't on display in a Gamecock uniform, but the most important thing, her talents will be on display at a Final Four. I do think her experience with us will help her navigate through that space because she's the only one on the team that's played at this level and really understands what it takes to win.

I know she'll impart ways of her knowledge of being here and know that it's a business trip, and they're going to fight tooth and nail.

As far as Breezy and who she came in with, no, that's not really -- kids are kids. They talk. They encourage each other. They probably talk a little bit of trash outside of the

game.

But no, that's not a dynamic that I addressed. I think we both want to win at the end of the day.

Q. Last time Gamecocks won a national championship was in 2022. And that win made you the first Division I coach in history, male or female, to win two NCAA titles. How do you as a coach that stands so true to yourself, your faith and your integrity stay balanced with what could be a lot of pressure playing on one of the biggest stages of basketball yet again?

DAWN STALEY: When you're over 50, that's what happens. Age does that to you. You know what you're going to tolerate, what you're not going to tolerate. At the end of the day, you want to stay true to who you are. And fortunately for me I've been able to do that. And you take some flack for it. You get some positive feedback for it.

I think again, at the end of the day, I am proud of being my mother's child. And that's all I truly want to be, just true to her legacy, true to who she was, what she stood for, and I'm more like her than I've ever been in my life and proud to be that.

Q. I noticed your players, some of them have an NIL opportunity tab on your website. I'm wondering, have you found NIL to be a good thing, a distraction, an enhancement? What has NIL meant for your program, especially heading into the Final Four?

DAWN STALEY: It's been all of that. All of it. But it's in our space now and we have to -- just like an opponent is in our space, just like guarding pick-and-roll actions, just like being able to execute offensively, that's part of our game. NIL is part of our game now. And we have to approach it and be as vested in it as we are winning basketball games because there's a direct correlation with your ability to manage the NIL space as managing personalities, as managing playing time, as managing a staff. So it's a big part of what we do.

So we don't shy away from it. We run towards it to streamline it, to make sure that we're servicing our players in the space just like we're servicing them in the mental health space and the physical space and the academic space. So it's a big part of a student-athlete's development.

Q. What did you learn about your team this past weekend with the Sweet 16? Obviously the deeper you get into the tournament, the more good teams you're going to face and more talented teams you're going to face. But I felt your team showed a lot of poise and

character and maturity in handling the Indiana run and then even holding off Oregon State when they made their run. What did you learn about your team this weekend that maybe you didn't know?

DAWN STALEY: Well, what I learned is what they've shown me all season long. The resiliency. The ability to play free and lock into what is necessary for us to win basketball games.

Nothing frightens them. Nothing. But I will say that I'm hoping it's part of our preparation and practice. Like, we try to put them in the worst possible situations and allow them to figure out how to fight to get out of them.

If you do enough of them, when it's time to play, they're just playing off of habit and not playing off emotions or runs that someone may have on us. They just stay present in what needs to take place at the moment. So they stay true to that.

Q. I know you mentioned earlier, when you talked about the preparation in June, in the preseason, that you're shocked a little bit that you're here. But what moment did you realize that this could be a reality where maybe you have conversations with like your coaching staff or people within the program and stuff like, hey, guys, if we keep doing XYZ -- or maybe it was a game or moment this year that this could be a reality?

DAWN STALEY: No. Every day. Every day we're like -- I call it we haven't fully drank the Kool-Aid; we're sipping on it. Because although you see us being resilient in games and winning basketball games, but at times we've been on the struggle bus. We lose big leads. We allow people to come back.

We have good highlighters, a male practice squad that beats us every day in practice. So they really ground us and they don't allow us to get too high with our highs and or low with our lows. We just try to maintain to get better every single day, and we rely on our habits.

It's scary. No doubt about it. It's scary. Even after -- I don't know -- 36 games it's still very scary. I have the utmost confidence in our team. I do. I do. But they're still young. They're still very young, and we don't know when the lull will rear its ugly head and force us to really find ourselves in a position where we really feel like we're going to lose basketball games.

And even the Tennessee game, it didn't look great. And SEC tournament, semifinals, the probability of us winning once we got the foul and the young lady had to go to the



free-throw line to make two, she missed them, we felt like we had a shot.

We don't know how, when, where, what, but we felt like they gave us a shot, and then we ended up winning that basketball game. So it's hard.

My guard is always up with our team. And that's not a bad place to be. That's not an untrusting place to be, it's a place to be where you know you're going to have to make some adjustments. You know you're going to have to say the right things to them to get them to understand what we need to do to execute the win. It's just to keep them and us -- I probably let my guard down a little bit last year because I knew what we had. We had a really good core group of players that they really understood each other. They knew each other.

They played well together. This team, they have the same qualities, but they're still very young and inexperienced. And I just have to sometimes keep my guard up to make sure that their guards are always up.

Q. I know you have two national championships already. But being undefeated, like you just mentioned that magical shot in the SEC Tournament, will the championship be a little more special if you were able to finish it all?

DAWN STALEY: Well, yeah, probably. Probably. I mean, it's one that although we planned for it, you plan for winning a national championship every year, and that journey takes you through some rocky roads, some smooth paved roads.

And surely we had our fair share of rocky in the beginning and then as we continue out throughout the season, the road got a little smoother and then obviously you're going to face some adversity throughout the season, and this team being undefeated really is a shocker to me.

So it means that we go an entire season undefeated and win a national championship, something that probably only the best teams have done, like the best teams that had experienced players, and that's something that don't have.

Q. You've spoken in the past about the media treatment of players, Angel Reese had some comments about it yesterday. I'm wondering, with such a young team, how do you coach them and teach them to kind of handle that, how to respond to it? Like, how do you handle that, if I may ask?

DAWN STALEY: Well, the biggest thing is you've got to keep the main thing the main thing. And if you're someone that is finding yourself or have found yourself and want to

put yourself out there to discuss certain topics, you will open yourself up to having to deal with it. And in our game, some people will like what you say and some people won't.

If they don't like what you're saying, you're going to get pounded on and you're going to always have to be able to have those discussions, whether you like them or not, until you move on from it.

It doesn't mean that young people should be vilified. Doesn't mean that young people should be treated in a manner of anything but respect. You could disagree with somebody, but you could respectfully do it. So, I mean, for our players, we often tell them, you know, fight whatever fight you want to fight; just understand all sides of it and know that or arm yourself with being ready to face the music when it comes to the questions, the comments and the biggest thing, people not liking you for it.

Q. Saw the news yesterday of Kamilla announcing she's going to the WNBA and saw your comment to it. What were those discussions like between you and her, and what do you think her game will look like at the WNBA level?

DAWN STALEY: She did it on April Fools. She didn't tell y'all it was a joke? (Laughter) No, I mean, I had one discussion with Kamilla about it, and it was yesterday. So I met with her yesterday in the afternoon and she told me that's what she decided to do. There was no trying to get her to come back. We've been through this with a lot of our players.

I want to walk them to the next level. When they're prepared, when I feel like they have done enough on this level and the only thing that can help them is being on that level. Kamilla's in that position. She's been in our program for three years now. She played a role for us in the first two, and now she plays the focal point.

Anytime you play the focal point in our program, it expedites your ability to be able to make the jump to the WNBA. And I do feel like her making the jump will only mean that her best basketball is ahead of her. I mean, there's so much more to her game that will be had because when you go to the next level and you're playing with like-minded players, you've got no choice but to elevate. And she'll do that at the next level.

Q. Did you think it was an April Fools joke at first?

DAWN STALEY: No, no. (Laughter) I wanted it to be, though.

