

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

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Bree Hall

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the South Carolina Gamecocks.

DAWN STALEY: I have a brief question because you guys are writers, right? I just posted a tweet. We had a long discussion in our coaches' meeting. So our players were in the locker room lying or laying down. (Laughter).

Lying? You sure? Well, I told our coaches -- someone taught me you lie to get laid, right? (Laughter). Sorry.

So excited to be here. Really to be here in another Final Four to play against NC State. Super cool opportunity for us to play in another Final Four, to play in the last weekend of all of college basketball and play on the biggest stage.

This is kind of what our players came to South Carolina for, and I'm so happy we can help them meet this moment.

Q. What have you seen or how have you seen women's basketball and the attention around it change? And where do you think it should go next, or where do you want to see it go next?

BREE HALL: I mean, the viewership is up. A lot of people are starting to tune into just women's sports, especially basketball. What I would like to see going forward is just see it keep going up, especially viewership, seeing lots of people, selling out games and stuff like that.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Like she said, I love where we are growing the sport, not only women's basketball, but all around. I'm just excited to see how the growth keeps growing.



And I just hope that when your favorite college player is done playing college, that they follow them to the league and that's going to bring us more views and just more attention to women in general as well.

So I'm just really happy to see our growth, and it's going to keep on increasing and going up from here.

Q. You had some special guests at practice yesterday. What was it like to have Asia and Chelsea there? And did they have any words of wisdom for you guys for the weekend?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: That was great. When you see pros like that that come in and were once in our shoes, it's just a reminder we can be like them as well. It was a really great sight to see them and just be able to -- we weren't personally able to talk to them because we were practicing, but just seeing Ray's reaction and seeing Chelsea Gray was really cool because I know that's one of her favorite players.

I know she's going to be locked in this weekend seeing Chelsea Gray or even if she didn't, but I'm just excited for Ray to meet her in that moment.

Q. I want to ask you to speak to little girls back home, especially in rural South Carolina who may not have traveled to Columbia, much less out of state, and the inspiration you are to them in achieving their goals?

BREE HALL: Just for little girls, stay consistent with what you want. If your goal is to be a national champion, become a pro, just stay consistent with it. It will happen for you if you put the work in behind it.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: My word of advice is to trust your process, trust your journey. Don't compare yourself to others. Everyone's speed is different. So just follow yours, follow your heart, and just trust you and trust God because he's always going to be there and just embrace your journey, just enjoy the process.

Q. Bree, you were a freshman with Saniya in 21-22.



Wondered if you kept up with her at all and how you've seen her game grow as a player sort of from an Xs and Os standpoint as you prepare to face her now on the other side.

BREE HALL: I don't talk to her too much, however I've seen her game grow a lot. She's a really good point guard, (indiscernible) the ball really well. Her defense is good. I've seen a lot of improvement in her game.

Q. Bree, after going through last season and not ending the way you wanted, I'm wondering whether you changed anything about your approach heading into this season, as now you're basically sitting in the same position?

BREE HALL: I think it's just kind of hard to apply -- it's kind of hard to apply what happened last season to this team. It's just a completely different team. I know we all want the same thing.

It's not like we have to have a conversation with anybody, like, you know -- it's never that conversation. I feel like everybody has the same goal, and I think we're ready.

Q. It's been really fun watching you guys in the way you guys interact with Coach. As a viewer it's been really inspiring to see because that is a unique experience for some student-athletes. What is it about Coach that makes you love playing for her?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It's been fun. I think she's done a great job adjusting to us. (Laughter). I think in the summer, in the summer she was just trying to hammer down so much. I don't think our team could have handled that much. She's done a great job just adjusting to our personalities as individuals and as a group.

I think as a group, we're like crazy. She describes us as daycare. And I completely agree with that. They're in nap time right now or quiet time. So she's done a great job.

A lot of people don't realize that about her but she just pours into our lives so much and she's done a great job adjusting to us. We're just going to keep being who we are, just keep being the fun, crazy group she loves.

Q. You guys seem to be lying in the weeds a little bit. See what I did there, coach? There's so much attention on the other semifinal, yet you guys are undefeated. Is there almost a feeling of, hey, how about us?

BREE HALL: What do you mean, hey --

DAWN STALEY: That you don't get as much attention.

BREE HALL: I think I said this earlier to somebody else, but I said I feel like we've noticed that we might not get as much coverage. But we're just so focused on us and want to win every game. We just approach every game, we want to go out there and perform and execute and play for each other.

Like, it's notice, but it's not something we're talking about in the locker room, not even remotely close.

Q. (Off microphone)?

BREE HALL: Yeah, I can't lie. I am a little bit. Just because -- we all said this, we didn't know really what to expect from our team. And just to see that we're back at the Final Four, it's pretty amazing.

Q. Want to ask about one of your teammates. What have you noticed about Tessa's growth during the tournament? And how is she as a teammate, how much fun is she?

BREE HALL: Well, Tessa's growth has been tremendous, honestly. Her defense has improved a lot since the beginning of the season, her shooting. And just her confidence overall has really grown. You can see it, like I said, on the floor.

How is she as a teammate? She's hilarious. She's very goofy, very funny, always brings the energy and just always brings that just liveliness that you need.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I'm really proud of Tessa's growth. Her confidence has grown so much, not only in the tournament but in the past year. And she's just become very reliable for us, and we trust her. It's just so amazing to see her growth as a freshman. She's not afraid to shoot the ball or guard the best player on the court.

I'm just really happy for her. I'm excited for her future.

And as a teammate, she's a freshman. She's going to act like a freshman. She's going to act a little, like a little kid sometimes. That's a good word to put. But she's going to be who she is. And she's just really fun to be around with. And we all love her so much.

Q. You guys just mentioned that Coach has done a good job adjusting to you guys, which I think is something she mentioned after the Elite Eight game too, that she had to adjust to your energy. How has she adjusted? What's different?

BREE HALL: Well, I'll say from the previous years we had a lot of older players -- they were fun, too, but this team is like a different level of childishness. It's ridiculous.

But it's in a good way. We're just always trying to have fun with each other, always just trying to take a part of the moment.

But the way that she's adjusted, I think she's just kind of loosened up. I don't know. I think that's a good way to put it. She just realizes there's some things you can't take care of when it comes to us, and there's some things you just have to let go because it is who we are, and it's just something that's kind of out of her control.

And what I mean by that, I mean talking and goofing around and stuff like that. So she just kind of goes with the flow.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I will have to agree with that. She's also, like, she lets us be who we are. But at times she's going to have to chime in and be, like, hey, none of that.

I think it was before the UNC game we got hyped and it was the worst game we started out. After the game she said, don't do that again. Don't get hyped before the games. We've never done any of that after that.

Just to see her adjust and tell us what to do and be who she is, it's a great sight to see. And we know when to handle business, because when she tells us to handle business, we go and do that.

It's been just really fun to be around her and the team as well.

Q. What has been the biggest evolution of the team from day one to now, especially with Te-Hina's addition with her 3-point shooting?

DAWN STALEY: From day one, we're just more disciplined. We're just a more focused group and just the chemistry that was formed organically.

I wouldn't say they were miserable, and misery loves company, but it was -- more than the majority was out of shape. So when you're out of shape, if you're looking to your left or your right and the other person's out of shape, you know, you just basically hold hands and try to get in shape.

But they've created a bond that happened just -- it wasn't forced by the coaching staff. Obviously we like it to be a lot more disciplined and we like to adhere to the standards that we've had throughout the years that we've been

successful and we found success in that correlation.

And then this team pretty much blows up all of that like in one summer. And then they figure out a way to work together. I think a lot of that had to do with our performance coach, Molly Binetti, because she had the tall task, the very tall task -- she said this was probably the most out-of-shape, really not-very-competitive team that she's ever had to work with.

And I think it's because we're so young. When you have multiple players from high school that they're used to working on their time. They're the biggest fish in a small pond in their high school and they can run the roost, you bring those habits into our setting. And you don't think things are important.

Like breakfast is important for us. You have to get up and have breakfast. Some of them would miss breakfast. Some of them would miss meetings. Some of them just didn't respond to text messages. Like, why do they do that?

And then you have to insert yourself as a coach and a coaching staff and say that's not how we do things.

But you can't expect that from the jump because they haven't been that way. So we have to create the habits. They created really good habits and they started holding each other accountable for their actions, both on and off the court, because when one person acts out, we pretty much use it as a team learning lesson.

So, pretty cool evolution of how this team has created an identity that helps them perform at a high level.

Q. You've been around the game for a minute as a player and as a coach. It seems in the last couple of years the growth of the women's game, which you've been a big part of, with what you've done with South Carolina, has come closer to the men's tournament as far as popularity. I mean, this year, I don't know if people are even talking about the men's tournament at all except for UConn having flight issues. What have you seen from your side of it, just the growth of it? 12.3 million watching the other day. I think you said you're one of them. The ticket prices for this weekend are insane on the secondary market. What have you seen as far as the growth compared to where it used to be?

DAWN STALEY: It's been a buildup. It's been a buildup. Our game has built up because we've been held back, quite frankly. We've been held back a very, very long time to now I think the fact that our TV deal was up. And I think

ESPN has done a great job at broadcasting, giving us access to -- a lot of games came on television this year that I probably watched the most out of any year this particular year.

There's the talent. There's the talent. There's the experienced talent that people want to see. There's a younger generation talent that people want to see. And it's in high demand. And there's no other place to go besides broadcast them.

And I just feel like we're going to get there. We're going to get there. I think the next thing that we need to make sure that our game has is the units. Like, you look at what the 68 teams are going to divide up, I think I saw 170 million between the 68 teams.

When you start bringing in revenue like that, it will move your campus in a different direction when it comes to women. So we've got to fight for that.

Q. You said in Albany that having a group like the Freshies you had last year, the way it did, it rocked you. Curious what it looks like. Raven said you don't sweat. We don't see you sweat. What did that actually look like for you? And did that make the process of adjusting to this group and their personalities harder?

DAWN STALEY: With the Freshies and transitioning to this team?

Obviously the Freshies hold a special place in my heart. They all chose to come to South Carolina knowing that some of them will have to sacrifice. Even them had to sacrifice.

They just did things the right way. We had, for four years, nothing -- like, seriously, no issues, no issues. If there were issues, they handled them. They came to practice every single day. They never looked at a practice card. Never. And they were just upstanding.

And then I got used to it. You get used to your life being a little easier as a coach on and off the court. And then once they all graduate, you have this different set.

I really am drawn to challenges. I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready for latenesses. I wasn't ready for no communication. I wasn't ready for all the things that come with having a younger team. I wasn't used to not having a leader just really take hold of situations and handle them.

So the transition was hard, but then once I started to look at it as a challenge, I wasn't going to let them get the best of me, our staff or our program or what we've built.

And that's when it started clicking in, like, hmm, this must happen. This, we've got to get a hold of this very, very quickly or else it's not going to work out for a part of us -- them or our coaching staff, one.

And we're strong. We're a very strong coaching staff that will not allow anyone to destroy what we built.

But they've taught me how to fall back some. They taught me how to -- there's a number of ways to be successful. They taught me that I have to pivot and do things a little bit differently than we normally do things.

It's a new normal, but the standard is still the standard, which I really, really appreciate. And now that we are where we are, it's really truly pleasant. They're pleasant to be around because they're better listeners when they're locked in. And their families are really good. Their parents are really good.

They tell me what they don't like, what they do like. They're very appreciative of the process. And the parents know what this team has put us through, and they're really, really appreciative of how far we've come. And they don't shy away from sending the texts letting us know that.

Q. When you look at this Final Four and there's a lot of talk about parity, but there's also powerhouses here, traditional powerhouses. Given who's here and all the growth around the game, does that heighten the experience for you to be here? And maybe I don't want to say you have to win it all, but heighten what's going around with this one?

DAWN STALEY: No. I mean, it's the same. You want to win. Your competitive juices are flowing. I mean, you can see the finish line. You can see it. You can see it. For us, we could see it.

And it's not disrespecting the process or not disrespecting our opponent, but once you get here, they can see it. NC State can see it. UConn can see it. Iowa can see the end of the finish line. There's one in the possible games left for all of us, and I want to win. I want to win.

Q. We've seen with women's sports, times previously, that it looked as if it was getting over the hump, whether it was the '96 Olympics, '99 World Cup. And do you see there's could be a pulling back that we see with previous highs?

DAWN STALEY: I think it's going to be different. I think you can see it in the amount of games that's televised. You can see it in the personalities. The personalities that

are analyzing our game and the storytellers of our game. They're different.

There's new leadership. There's new leadership when it comes to the decision makers of our game. And I do think they're taking it more personal to allow our game to grow and continue to grow.

And I know it's going to be because of their leadership that it opens up to a place where hopefully we'll be able to hear about how, the inner workings of what made this particular leadership group allow women's basketball to grow. Because I like to see it and hear about it.

Q. With NC State back in the Final Four, it's kind of a time to reflect a little bit on Kay Yow's legacy. Did you have any memories of Kay Yow? And in particular, I came across a '91 game when you were with UVA, you played against NC State, 123-120, in double overtime. Seemed quite iconic.

DAWN STALEY: I fouled out in regulation. Kay Yow is iconic, and I know that she probably has a hand on NC State being here. They've got an angel up in heaven that's still coaching them. Spiritually, maybe some of these players know of her legacy or not, but anytime that someone that's coached Olympic teams, that's a legend in coaching, they'll always have a spirit about their program.

So, I mean, I hope she's happy. I really do. I hope she's truly happy with Wes Moore and their Wolfpack team being here in the Final Four, and I mean it's a really happy time for, especially when you haven't been here in a long time.

I think Wes Moore probably said it earlier, in that it may not have been their best team on paper -- because two years ago they had a really, really good team that was probably projected to be in Final Four and they didn't make it. And it's funny how you get hot and you get the unlikeliest group to get to the mountaintop.

Basketball is funny in that way. You persevere, and you figure out ways in which to shock the world. I'm sure they shocked the world when it comes to where they were at the beginning of the season to where they are now. I think it's a beautiful story.

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