

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

Friday, April 5, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

NC State Wolfpack Coach Wes Moore

River Baldwin

Aziaha James

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference



South Carolina - 78, North Carolina State - 59

WES MOORE: First of all, I mentioned earlier I felt like this was the best South Carolina team they've had because of the obviously the presence of Cardoso on the block is tough to match up with. And then they have so many players that are capable of knocking down 3-point shots.

And unfortunately that's kind of what happened in the third period, actually the second half. We got outscored 44-20 in the paint. So start of the third quarter, we didn't do a really good job in our man-to-man of defending pick on the ball and rotating and things like that. So we tried to go zone. Probably should have got out of it quicker.

But again, give them credit. Third quarter we got outscored 29-6, and that was the ball game.

But again tip your hat to them. I think they hit 6 out of 10 3s in the second half. And, again, we're really hurting us in the paint. They've got a great team.

And, yeah, we've had an unbelievable season. I'm proud of these young ladies, the run we've been on. This stinks to end it this way. But I'm sure after we've had a little bit of time away from it and can reflect, we have a lot to be proud of.

Q. Coach said the third quarter was the change in the game. The first half was so competitive. What was the big difference in the third quarter?

AZIAHA JAMES: The first half was very competitive. I felt like in the third quarter we didn't come out in the locker

room how we were supposed to come out in the locker room. I feel like we could have fought harder. I feel like we hung our heads and got into our heads mentally.

As a leader, I want to fault myself, because I could have helped. I could have said more up there. But at the end of the day I'm still proud of my team. I wouldn't pick any other girls to play with. Like Coach Moore said, everybody doubted us and we made it here. I'm so proud of them.

RIVER BALDWIN: She touched it. We could have come out in the third quarter stronger. I mean, when our offense isn't flowing we have to lock in on defense and get stops, and that usually translates and fuels -- on defense and then it usually translates and fuels our offense.

Yeah, just keeping our heads up and picking each other up and keeping our energy, that's when we play our best.

Q. When you left the court, looked like you and Coach had a moment. Can you share or do you want to share what was said in that moment and what you were feeling?

AZIAHA JAMES: He was just letting me know what I could have done on that last play, when I got my shot block. So it was just a coach-to-player moment at the time. It doesn't matter what the score was. He's still going to be a coach at the end of the 40 minutes, always.

Q. Obviously the close loss at Va. Tech and close loss to Notre Dame and Greensboro that were almost titles, how did you all rebound and get to the Final Four from that? And how proud are you of the fact that you at least hung that banner?

RIVER BALDWIN: Honestly, I think we used the doubts and being underestimated as motivation. I mean, playing Notre Dame in the ACC championship, losing to Virginia Tech twice, just using that as motivation, watching the film, fixing what we can fix and just moving on to the next play, the next game has benefited us.

AZIAHA JAMES: Likewise, I think River said everything. But the difference between those games and this game, I

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feel like we didn't move to the next play. I feel like every mistake we made we hung our head and not look forward to the next play. And we're definitely going to look at film, and we're definitely going to fix that.

Q. You both now have a few years under your belt with NC State. How has this run and this team felt different than any other years you've had in the past with the Pack?

AZIAHA JAMES: I've been here for three years, and I see a major difference on this team. I feel like it's a player-led team. We stick together on and off the court. You see the joy, the enjoyment, you see the chemistry that we have.

It's never a dull moment between these girls. They're not just my teammates; these are my sisters. Like, I'm going to like keep this -- sorry -- I'm going to keep this memory forever. I love this group of girls forever. These are my sisters. And I'm so proud of them.

So much hard work to get here. We left everything on the court each game, and I'm so grateful to have them. I'm so grateful to have Coach Moore.

Q. In the final minute there, even with the score almost final, Wolfpack fans, the Wolfpack chant right towards the end there. What does it say about the culture this program has that they're sticking out and making themselves heard to the very end?

RIVER BALDWIN: Wolfpack Nation has followed us across the country. Their support is unmatched. Their love is unmatched. I couldn't ask for a better support system, fans.

AZIAHA JAMES: Wolfpack Nation is like no other. It's not just the crowd -- they're our family. The love that they share with us, and through wins and losses they're always going to have our backs.

Q. In the first quarter, you guys punched first. You hit them in the mouth first. But it seemed like after that they were kind of able to kind of catch you guys off guard, throw you off guard a little bit. Was it something different they did? And Ms. Baldwin, they had two tremendous bigs inside. You did great, but what was it like battling two of those ladies instead of just one where they really worked inside with you guys?

RIVER BALDWIN: You've got to credit the bigs of South Carolina. They do a good job using their physicality. They're big, they keep the ball high. Cardoso holds the ball over her head and I can't reach it. You have to use your

body and make them score over you and try to keep them away from the basket as best as you can. But at the end of the day it's layups.

Q. (Off microphone)?

AZIAHA JAMES: They just punched us in the mouth in the third quarter. I felt like the third quarter really hurt us. I feel like we could have fought harder. It was 6-29. We can't let things like that happen to win a championship.

Q. River, you spoke after the games in Raleigh, we spoke about how this team coming here had made you fall back in love with basketball. Can you expand a little bit on that as your college career comes to an end?

RIVER BALDWIN: I wouldn't trade my two years in Raleigh for anything. I found a family here, a true family. They gave me confidence. They made me fall in love with the game again.

Having coaches that have confidence in you and trust you, and teammates that trust you and love you on and off the court, and just knowing you can turn to that family at any time is incredible. The chemistry on this team is unmatched. I've never played with a group of girls like this.

Just having the run that we had, not only have I fallen in love with basketball again, but we made history at NC State. Like I said, I wouldn't trade these two years in Raleigh for anything.

Q. Obviously this isn't your only deep tournament run. You were on the Elite Eight team in 2022. What are the similarities that you've seen from this year's squad and that one? And what are some of the things that you want to carry over and impart on the team next year with the new freshman class coming in as one of the older statesmen now?

AZIAHA JAMES: Like I said before, this bond with the team, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. After that loss, we just came in the locker room and we told each other, this one -- this loss, it's going to hurt right now. But we have to still stick together and be a family and still love each other.

As a senior next year, I'm going to still emphasize that the same way. We're going to be a sisterhood. We're going to have that strong chemistry on and off the court. So it's going to be stronger. It's going to be even stronger.

Q. When you hear River talk about her time in this program, what does that mean to you? What has she

meant to NC State?

WES MOORE: It will be hard to replace. I'm just so proud of her. She really had always been kind of almost a role player, and we talked early in the year. I told her she was going to have to be somebody that we run things through. In our system, you've got to have somebody that's a consistent scorer down there.

Just unbelievable what she was able to do and how we leaned on her for inside presence on both ends of the floor. There were times when maybe the shot wasn't going down, but I couldn't take her off the court because she did such a great job on the boards.

So taking charges. How many post players do you see take as many charges as she has?

I've loved having her. I'm going to miss her. But right now we're going to be running that donut offense with a big hole in the middle without her.

Q. This team is definitely built differently than some of the recent teams Dawn's had in terms of its depth. Could you give us a sense of the challenges of game planning against and playing against a team where players like Ashlyn Watkins or MiLaysia Fulwiley are coming off the bench?

WES MOORE: Watkins had 20 rebounds tonight. Just to be able to have such an inside/outside game. There were times we were trying to maybe double from the weak side on Cardoso or dig from the ball side and try to get it out of there. But she buries you so deep that even doubling is hard to do.

And when they shoot it like that, they came into the game having two players shooting 43 percent from 3 and one shooting 47 percent from 3. We knew it was going to be a challenge. You just hope you catch them on a night when they're not shooting well from the perimeter so you can give more attention to Cardoso.

But again, it's the best team they've had because of that. So tough match-up. I regret now going to the zone and definitely not getting out of it sooner. But we did, we came out in the third quarter. We just weren't aggressive enough. And that's on me.

I don't know what happened. But we were a step slow. We didn't execute pick-on-the-ball defense. When we did try to double Cardoso, the weak side didn't rotate. And they got layups.

So again I should have probably used every timeout I had

and try to get their focus back. But, again, they took advantage of it.

Q. After that Elite Eight run in '22, you lose four starters. River and Mimi are the two players that transferred in. Last year you lose four starters. Those two stick around. This year they're the super senior veterans, the fifth years. What did they mean to sort of lead this team and this new era sort of NC State basketball?

WES MOORE: That's the thing, last year, for whatever reason, we had more depth of talent, more experience. We had kids that were on that Elite Eight team, but for whatever reason, that's probably the danger of the portal, they just didn't mesh. We had some great wins. We beat Iowa on the road.

We beat Louisville on the road, I don't remember who all. But we had some great wins. Then down the stretch we just didn't gel. So sometimes it's addition by subtraction. We lost some players and these players knew they were going to be counted on to be leaders.

River and Mimi, in particular, and some of the others. And when you put a player in that position, you hope that they step up and grab the bull by the horn, and they did.

So a heck of a ride compared to where we started and where we finished.

Q. In the first half, in the first quarter guys you punched them --

WES MOORE: First half. First half we were down one point. Again, we tied them in the first quarter. One down in the second quarter. So I mean, I don't know that the second quarter we lost anything, but third quarter we lost it.

Q. What were some of the things that you did well in the first quarter, in the first half, that you were trying to do in the second half but it just didn't work?

WES MOORE: I think a combination. Again, I give them credit. They turned up the heat and did a great job defensively. Like I said, they came out really offensively, they were aggressive. The pick-and-roll we didn't do a good job of getting up and doing what we wanted to do against it.

And we looked slow. We looked flatfooted. Then when I saw that and saw how they were killing us inside, we tried to go zone and that didn't look very good either. And give them credit, they hit six out of 10 3s in the second half. But in the third quarter, in particular, they hit five out of nine 3s.

So when you're doing that -- at half time, Paopao I think was 0-for-3 and Bree Hall 0-for-3 from 3.

In the second half, one of them goes 2-for-2 and the other one goes 1-for-1 and that changes things. In the third quarter. So they hit shots. They did a good job defensively. Again, I'll take some of the blame for that. We looked stagnant in the third quarter. We stood around. We went one-on-one too much instead of moving the ball, moving our bodies and putting some pressure on them.

So I'll probably throw up a couple times when I watch the third quarter and second-guess the heck out of myself for the next six months, but other than that, hey, I'm happy.

Q. Looking back on that 2022 team, the two players that were on that team, Aziaha James, leading scorer, Madison Hayes, leading rebounder for the season, how big is it now after this run for players that are coming back to have that experience on the big stage, having that Final Four experience going forward?

WES MOORE: No doubt. It's a great experience. Hopefully we can draw from that. I told them today, I thought the last three weeks our practices were unbelievable, our energy, our focus, we were locked in. And I told them today, hey, next year let's try to do that from day one.

But, yeah, I agree. It's got to help. And I mean, this has been an unbelievable experience. I've been a head coach 35 years in college, first time ever to be on this stage myself, and it's unbelievable.

I mean the NCAA, the committee, Cleveland, the hosts, all the people that are involved in this have done an unbelievable job of making you feel -- we're in Cleveland -- we're rock stars. Hopefully that little guy doesn't come out.

But it's just a great experience. And hopefully it makes you hungry to want to get back and take another shot at it.

Q. I was reminiscing, 10 years ago I was covering you in the WNIT, and now you're here in the Final Four. You mentioned the team two years ago. Players from both of those teams were in the stands supporting y'all. Now you have this banner they're going to hang. This group will hang a banner. It will be there 25 years. Do you sense a camaraderie building and do you sense there's a momentum and a love that's kind of building, that's lifting this thing up?

WES MOORE: Yeah, that's what's pretty neat. Of course I was with Coach Al from '93 to '95. So I think when you're at a school now 11 years here, you have players that

played for you your first two or three years and you have players that are playing for you now, but they all share that family feeling. And no doubt it's great to see them here.

It's great for them, when they call you, they text you. But definitely, and even before I got here because when we have Play4Kay games, they're special all over the country, but you can imagine how special they are in Raleigh and we usually have a lot of our former players back.

And it's just amazing again the connection the players feel from all eras for playing for NC State, and our fans probably have a lot to do with that as well.

Q. Saniya had a rough night tonight. What's your message to her, and also what are you looking forward to going forward with her and Aziaha as a leader?

WES MOORE: That happens. And again tough situation. Play your former team. I'm sure they wanted to make sure she didn't have a big night as well.

But we wouldn't be here without Saniya. She's had an unbelievable season and a great leader for us. And it happens. Again, that's been our strength all year, when somebody's had a bad night, one or two other players have stepped up and scored 20 or 25.

We still had five people in double figures. Unfortunately, tonight we didn't really have a lot of that. But again a bad night to have a bad night. But I give South Carolina a lot of credit for that.

Q. How does being on this stage make you a better coach in your 35 years of coaching?

WES MOORE: I don't know. I mean, right now I don't feel like a very good coach after that butt kickin'. But our players, you've got to have players. I always say you don't win the Kentucky Derby with a mule. You've got to have horses.

And our players have just played great most of the season and most nights. That's what it's about.

I learned that lesson -- I probably have given you more than you want -- but I learned that lesson really well when I got to UT Chattanooga. And my first year we won, I think, 10 games. The next year we won 26.

I did the same exact things, we ran the same stuff. We ran practices. We prepared. Everything the same. We just had a different set of players.

So I learned real early, it's about them. It's not about me.



Great players.

Q. What makes coaching against Dawn Staley difficult to either prepare for or over the course of a game adjust to?

WES MOORE: Well, again, she's a great coach. She has great players, and that's a tough combination to go up against.

Like I said, I think it's the best team yet. We beat them a few years ago at their place when they had Aliyah Boston, and we were able to kind of cheat off some people and give more attention to Boston and try to slow her down a little bit.

It's hard to do that with that team right there. If you try to help on the post, somebody else is going to make you pay. And that's what happened. In the first half, what were they, from 3, they were 2-for-9 in the first half and we were in the game. And then the second half they're 6-for-10. And here we go.

But again, great coach, and they got after us defensively. Kind of took us out of things we wanted to do, maybe.

And offensively, you know, fast break points hadn't talked about that. We got beat 21-6 off fast break. We talked all week about, we can't give up easy points. And that was off fast break and off second-chance points off boards.

We did a pretty good job on the boards. Didn't get it done on the break. So they find your weakness and they exploit it.

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