

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

Saturday, April 6, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

South Carolina Gamecocks Coach Dawn Staley

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning, welcome to the NCAA women's Final Four pre-national championship press conference featuring the South Carolina Gamecocks. We'll open up for questions with Coach Dawn Staley.

Q. How much does last year's game, if you were to study it on film or whatever it may be, does it help this year because you guys have changed so much and so have they, or does it not matter, and you just focus on Iowa's film from this year?

DAWN STALEY: I haven't watched last year's game. So the focus is on this team this year.

Q. On a lighter note, you had a really cool moment with Aaliyah Boston last night. It seemed like it brought you so much joy to give her all of her credit, accolades, hype her up. Can you walk me through all the feels of that moment, what you were feeling?

DAWN STALEY: As a coach, I've had a pretty successful playing career, and once I left playing, I totally locked into coaching and being the best coach that I could be.

It's super fulfilling to know that you can be a part of your players' lives, where they can fulfill imagined dreams and unimagined dreams. To see her in such -- I mean, she was playing in that game last year during this time -- and to have her flip it and be really good at it, it does the heart well. It fills my heart with so much joy.

And she's really good at it. Some people say you can't be really good at two things. She's really good at two things. And I'm probably missing out on some other stuff that she's really great at as well.

I'm giving you what I see and what you all see. She's going to be a star in this space.

Q. Going undefeated is a unique thing. There have only been nine teams that have done it previously. I wonder, when you did lock into coaching, was there an undefeated team that you watched and thought, man, it would be incredible if I could lead a team to that? Or a favorite player. Bree said she loved B.G.'s undefeated run at Baylor. And Raven mentioned Crystal Dangerfield when she went on one undefeated team at UConn.

DAWN STALEY: No, not really. When I look at basketball, I don't look at wins and losses. I look at how things are executed and allow the wins or the losses to take care of themselves. And as much as you bring up like an undefeated season, it doesn't feel like it because, I mean, we've played some bad basketball that made it feel like we lost.

So it's those kinds of moments that keep us just locked into the task at hand of playing -- just trying to play great basketball, just trying to make great decisions out there to increase our chances of winning.

It's really hard to believe that we're undefeated because I don't feel it. As a coaching staff, we have to pinch ourselves to even know that's true because deep down we see what our shortcomings are every single day.

Q. I would love your perspective on this because there's always a lot of debate for players and coaches about whether a championship is needed to cement a legacy. You've gone through that as a player and obviously as a coach. How do you feel about that? Because it feels like it's an endless debate about whether those championships are needed.

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I was really good in college, never won a championship. You got to win a championship. You've got to win a championship. That's me personally. Like I had a great career. But it's always, did you win a championship?

Went to the Final Four three times. We never won. I do think -- I agree with Stewy when it comes to winning the



championship. We're going to talk about GOATs, I think she's the GOAT, to be able to win four National Championships and to be MVP. I think she was MVP all four times.

If Caitlin wins the championship, she's pretty damn good, yeah, like, she's a GOAT. I mean, she's really damn good regardless. But winning the championship would seal the deal.

I hope to the dear Lord she doesn't.

(Laughter).

Q. A question about C. Vivian Stringer. You wrote a few years back that both to you and Coach Law she shared landmarks of her journey but still gave you space to not just go down that path? Could you elaborate on that. What did she tell you, and how did she allow you to carve out your own space?

DAWN STALEY: Coach Stringer has been doing this for a long time. She was the example of what black coaches had, in looking at her journey, looking at her success, and looking at her courage, looking at all the things that she had to endure.

She often calls. I talked to Coach Stringer probably two or three weeks ago. She called and just kind of congratulated us on the season we're having and to pour into us. She doesn't do it every day, but every so often when you get a call from a legendary coach, it gives you inspiration, it gives you stamina, it gives you what you need in that moment to have the strength to continue on with whatever challenges you're faced with.

And she's always welcoming. If I have something to run by her, always. And always appreciative that I would use her as a resource. So it is that.

She doesn't overwhelm you with things. She allows you the space to grow and to learn and to be there when you're at a crossroads to give you some wisdom.

Q. Raven has talked so much about her journey over this past year. I'm curious, what stood out to you about her growth not only on the court but also as a person?

DAWN STALEY: Raven is finding herself on and off the court. She was one that didn't really talk a whole lot. You really couldn't see her personality. I do think, with the successes that she's been having on the court, she feels a lot more comfortable to share who she is, the fun loving.

Raven's never had a bad day. How you see her play in a game is exactly what she brings to the court every single day. We say, okay, we're going to go 50 percent, she doesn't know 50 percent. She goes all out.

So the journey of her having a voice, and no matter what that voice is, she's in such a learning phase of her life. She's open to learning -- not just basketball, but history. She's learning what she likes. She's learning a pathway of who she wants to be. And she's unafraid to go out there to say or do some things that, it will rock you a little bit, it will make you laugh, but it is who she's becoming.

I love that about young people, to be unafraid to say what you want to say, what's on your heart to say. And it might be the wrong thing, but we've all been 18- to 22-year-olds. And we all have said some things that may not be the right thing. You live, you learn.

I just hope that, throughout every young person's journey in this space to be able to express themselves and to not be vilified because even to this day we say things that can be deemed hurtful to other people, but it's not in that context. We need to look at people for their entire journey.

If you can speak to someone's entire journey, you'll find that your knee-jerk reaction to what someone says isn't that deep at all, isn't that hurtful at all. It's just a perspective.

Q. Yesterday you said the key to your third quarter was -- it wasn't magic. It was about playing simple, good basketball. I'm curious, has that been always how you approach adjustments during your coaching career, or is that something you had to learn?

DAWN STALEY: No, I haven't always been that way, good Lord. I've had to lay down my religion a few times in the half-court -- I mean, halftime.

But you approach each team in how they receive information. You deliver it in how they receive it because ultimately you just want them to get the message. Sometimes we as coaches mess up the message with how angry we can get, how competitive we can get in those moments.

It was really no yelling, no screaming. You could see clearly what we needed to do to make the adjustments. It was just to simplify, just to pass to the open person. Don't hold the ball more than a second. Like have a plan when you catch the ball.

If you want to score, have a plan. If you don't, pass the ball. Give it to Kamilla, give her an easy look, knock down

a 3 here or there when you're open -- very, very simple.

I think, by us coming out and making our first shot, it ignited what we were able to do on the defensive side of the basketball. We definitely had to clean up our ball-screen defense. We definitely had to apply a lot more pressure to the initiator of their offense.

Once that happened, we found ourselves getting a little bit some easy buckets and getting out in transition and just putting NC State back on their heels a little bit, because they had us on our heels for two quarters.

Q. When Raven came in, did you ever have to have any kind of specific talk with her, point guard to point guard, and say, this is what they need you to do? There will be a time when everybody is looking for you for answers. Or was that pretty ingrained in her with her high school days?

DAWN STALEY: Raven came from a great high school program, a great AAU program. I know that a lot of people want her to be a scoring point guard. She wasn't developed to be a scoring point guard. She was developed to be a consummate point guard that this is what you do. When it's time to pass, it's time to pass. When it's time to score, it's time to score.

I think sometimes, whether it's social media, whether it's family members that want her to take that next jump. And she will. But her mentality has always been to pass first. That is her passion. That is her development.

Then you have to teach her opportunities for her to score. That's where we are now. Because of what happened last year in the Final Four, it kind of expedited it a little bit because she has the urge now, like she wants to break out into being an opportunistic scorer.

So I think by the time she ends her career, she's going to have the best of both worlds when it comes to that.

Q. Raven had just said that what happened last year almost made her want to quit basketball and that she has watched that game, she said, probably more than 100 times. I'm wondering what conversations you had with her. Did she ever come to you and say, I don't want to do this anymore? And how did you help her get over that hump?

DAWN STALEY: No, she didn't tell me that. I think, when you're embarrassed, I think when we lost, like all of that, it makes you question. The game will do that to you. Anything that you love and you're passionate about will make you question it at some point.

That is what you need for your breakthrough. And if you don't have enough just power, strength, your breakthrough will never happen. Raven is going to be a great player because she was able to break through that moment and catapult her into that next level now.

She's going to be tested somewhere again along the line. We all are given life tests. You either pass them and move on to the next test, or you keep retaking them. Think about it. Think about everybody's life. What is the very thing that you can't get over? You keep seeing it time and time again. Then when you hurdle that, you move on to the next one.

So I think Raven is at that place. She's young. It's a little bit harder for us as grown-ups, she's a little bit younger, the more young you are, hopefully the more people in your life can help you navigate through that. And you're not as stubborn to give up on something.

Raven's in a good place. She's been given what she's needed to learn in a good moment, in a good young moment in her career that's helped her grow.

Q. I know you're a fan of watching basketball games. You've said many times you sit back on the couch, and the options this year have been so much better than years past. When you think about the game tomorrow, which caps off a historic year with attendance, ratings, everything else, star players, how great is it that it's you guys going for an undefeated season against a generational player in Caitlin Clark and Iowa that's been able to capture the attention of a lot of new fans?

DAWN STALEY: I think it's great. It's a monumental game for our game. We're very fortunate to be a part of it. We get to witness firsthand the legacy of Caitlin Clark. You watch her. You prep for her. You can't help but to really love how she dissects the game. You love how she executes.

I mean, it's simple. Her game is simple and yet powerful. How do you defend fundamental basketball with offense with fundamental defense? You can't. She's going to win every time.

So you've got to show her different looks in order for her to not settle in and picking you apart. But we also have to play our side of the ball. We got to defend. We got to put some points on the scoreboard.

I do think it will be a -- I hope it's the most watched game. I've been a part of witnessing from the outside looking into the most watched game. It's going to be fun to hopefully

be a part of it, like in the mix of things.

I hope that everybody gets exactly what they want out of it. And I just hope the viewers, the people in attendance will take tomorrow's moment and carry it to the rest of the history of our sport. Hopefully we can keep the eyeballs and demand where it needs to be.

Q. You just talked about what a massive weekend this is for women's basketball, women's sports in general. One of the major issues facing women's sports now is the debate/discussion/topic about transgender athletes, biological males in women's sports. I was wondering if you could tell me your position on that issue.

DAWN STALEY: Damn, you got deep on me, didn't you? I'm on the opinion of, if you're a woman, you should play. If you consider yourself a woman and you want to play sports or vice versa, you should be able to play. That's my opinion.

You want me to go deeper?

Q. Do you think transgender women should be able to participate?

DAWN STALEY: That's the question you want to ask, I'll give you that. Yes, yes. So now the barnstormer people are going to flood my timeline and be a distraction to me on one of the biggest days of our game, and I'm okay with that. I really am.

Q. We've talked about the mindset that Raven was in after that loss last year. She mentioned that, when she was really struggling, L.A. kind of really took her in, really helped her grow her faith, kind of helped her come out of that place. As a coach, what does it mean to see those kinds of relationships foster and grow through something like that?

DAWN STALEY: That's what it's all about. That's why you play a sport. Obviously you play a sport to win, but the relationships and experiences that you have with your sisters is what will carry you. The fact that L.A. would take her to church and to find answers to why things have happened the way they have.

Because that's what she was searching for, she was searching for an answer -- why. Why was I put in this situation? Why did this happen? That's the best place for her to find her answers.

I actually knew about that. I actually knew about because it became part of our conversations. Raven is very

impressionable, so I'm glad she chose the right person to help her navigate through a space that was really hard for her.

Q. I wanted to go back to Aaliyah Boston. I know because you're playing or prepping for games, you don't get to watch the ESPN broadcast a lot. What is, when you look at all the ratings and everything going on with this tournament, having people like Aaliyah, Chiney, Andraya on that set, what does it mean for people who want to stay in the game?

DAWN STALEY: I think with Elle, Draya, Chiney and now Aaliyah Carolyn Peck, Black women holding it down, holding it down, taking it to another level. And it's quite remarkable. And for Aaliyah to be a part of that, she knows. She knows now what she's reaching for because she's seeing some of the best analysts that I've ever been around.

It's not -- they're giving credit where credit is due with every single team that is participating here at the Final Four. That's not always the case. They're breaking it down to its simplest form where everybody that is tuned in can really understand our game.

They appear on other talk shows. They are lifting our game up in spaces that are just male dominant. I think some of these male talk shows don't really know about the fabric of our game. They don't know the inner workings. They don't even know how to break the game down. They're just going off of probably what someone is telling them to say or social media.

But to hear them break it down -- and I don't like to watch it, but I'll tune in and I'll watch. Like, I'm listening, I'm working and listening. That's my background noise. And sometimes I have to stop. I'm just like, damn, like this is great. Can I find some strategy in this? Can we really do this?

I mean, it's awesome. It's intentional. It's intentional, like somebody chose that group of women to uplift our game, and they're doing a magnificent job. It's different. It's different than years past. It's a lot different. Like, it's colorful. It's intentional, each and every dynamic to our game, and they're doing it beautifully.

Q. I know it's a quick turnaround from yesterday, but have you noticed anything so far, just being around your team, if players are extra relishing in this opportunity to play Iowa? I know we've talked about Raven too and what that meant to her. Anything you've noticed so far? Do you anticipate they will be motivated to get the job done this time?

DAWN STALEY: They're pretty motivated. We just had our film session this morning, and they're all locked in. It wasn't daycare this morning. It was -- I don't know if it's just because they just woke up, but they're locked in.

Like you ask them questions, they really understand what we need to do to win, which is pretty cool to see that dynamic from this team.

But I would say ever since we got into the NCAA Tournament, there's a lot more focus than the regular season, meaning when it's time to prep. There's a lot more writing notes. There's a lot more recall. So they're more locked in, and hopefully they can get it done.

Q. It's a long season. Kids are tired. Kids are nicked up. At this point, how do you balance preparation and rest?

DAWN STALEY: Great question. At this point, rest is equally as important as working out. We won't do anything. We're going to walk through the hour that we get here, and then I think there's an open practice that our players will probably get juiced up for, and they'll move a little bit quicker than what we're going to do in our closed practice.

Tough game. At this point, like when we were -- when we won in, I think 2017, we just did a walk-through. We just did a walk-through, as somebody told me -- no, I'm not going to say that. I'm not going to say that -- 2022, walk-through, walk-through.

They're locked in. And it's not very much prep time because we get an hour on the court. We get a 50-minute open practice. You can't really do anything.

So it's more about film sessions and talking to individual players about what we need them to -- how we need to play and execute.

Q. Hey, Dawn, when you're looking at a team like Iowa and how Hannah Stuelke played in the game yesterday, what is going to be the biggest challenge in containing her in the paint? But also Iowa as a whole, and flip it over to how you want to initiate on the offensive end and be the point of contact in terms of attacking the paint on your own?

DAWN STALEY: Stuelke is -- it's a matchup that we've got to win. Like, we've got to win that one.

First you've got to run in transition. I mean, she gets out, her and Martin, they get out. They get out. They are

determined. It was, you know, I will run for a layup. That's the mentality.

Then what she's able to do in the half-court, I mean, she puts you back on your heels. We certainly have to use our length. We've got to make her play through us, and she doesn't mind that at all.

On the flip side of that, we have to make her guard us. She's going to have to guard not one, not two, not three, four. We've got four or five legitimate post players that she's going to see and have to guard, and they all are different.

Iowa's a challenge. They're playing their best basketball. They're playing inspired. They're playing like they want to win a national championship. So are we. I think it's a crash course of who's going to have the better run, who's going to be able to execute when it's time to execute.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

