

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

Thursday, April 3, 2025

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks Coach Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Raven Johnson

Semifinal Pregame Media Conference



DAWN STALEY: Just congratulations to the other three teams that are here in the Final Four. We are super excited to be here.

We are representing the SEC, us and Texas, and proud that we could represent our league in such a fashion because we certainly competed all year long. And the reason why we're here is because of the competitiveness of our conference.

Q. I know that a lot of the former Gamecocks are still very critical to this program. People like Markeshia Grant have been working with you all on building resiliency. Can you all talk about the value of those relationships and how it has helped you to bounce back through difficult moments throughout the season?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Relationships are important no matter where you go in life. To be able to talk to alumni and former Gamecocks, it helps our program a lot because they've been through it. They've been through the early years when Coach Staley was coaching them.

They speak life into us. And she's helped us during the season with team bonding and just bringing us closer together and just having that involvement with everyone on the team. And it's helped us greatly and we learn from it. And we've continued to use those team-bonding moments to help us in the long run and experience like this.

RAVEN JOHNSON: What she said. Even Khadijah Sessions, she tells us a lot, that she's been here before. And she was telling us about her experience and stuff like

that. Like she said, alumni, they come back and they just don't come back. They also like practice against us. Just to go against them, it means a lot honestly and get a lot of knowledge from them.

Q. The coaches talk a lot about habits, team habits with you guys. What would you say are the habits of this team? And how closely do you feel like you guys are sticking to them and/or swaying from them?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: That's a good question. I think we've done a really good job with recovering. Our habits have been way better for that because we play a tight schedule and we've been playing games.

We do cryo now with -- some of the girls do cryo and do Norma tech and get their body worked on. We do a good job with that, and just being able to get our bodies ready for a 40-minute battle.

Shout-out to the program and everyone else who has been involved in that. And just being able to know that recovery and rest is a big part of March and that we've done a really good job with that in that aspect.

RAVEN JOHNSON: A lot of us hate cryo and ice bath, especially me. But it helps our body a lot.

Q. You've been affectionately known as Dawn's Day Care for a couple of years in the program, but what's it about the way Coach Staley coaches you, and the rest of your coaches, that allows you to be 100 percent yourself even if it does mean it's a little childish?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Coach tells us when we get a little too loose, like before the SEC championship, she told us we were a little too loose and we need to tighten up. She knows when we're loose and she knows when we're right. It's a balance, honestly.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, she's done a really great job this year. I think last year she was learning about it. She knows that our attention spans are very short and that she's got to get it on when everyone's paying attention. She tells the coaches that, hey, they're going to go wild in

like a minute or so, so get through your point.

She's just done a really good job balancing it and helping us out. And she's joined us, part of our childish moments as well. Sometimes she starts it as well.

But it's just a really good balance. That's the type of coach you want to play for. She does a really good job locking us in. And she tells us, the seniors and the leaders, hey, get your team to tighten up; they're a little too loose. And relay that message to the team.

And we've done a better job, but I know we can do a little better. But we're just going to be who we are. She accepts us for who we are as well.

Q. I don't know if you guys can be too familiar with each other, having played three times already. Is this going to come down to who's got the best defense? And are these the two best defenses in women's college basketball?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It's going to come down to heart, effort and controlling the things that we can control, which is attitude and effort. Obviously we can't control how the officials do the game. We can't control everything that's outside of that.

But we can control our effort and attitude. Whoever is going to win tomorrow is going to determine who wants it more and who just wants to pay attention to the details and be there for your team and who's going to compete and just compete for a 40-minute battle.

Q. On the flipside of that, when Coach needs to tell you guys to kind of tighten up because you're being a little too goofy, how does the sort of goofy, silliness, help you guys from getting things too heavy, especially in a program that has such high expectations?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I think it helps us, honestly, because, like Pli, Pli said we need to get off TikTok or whatever. I think some of us we need TikTok, but if you eat, sleep, breathe basketball, you're honestly going to be depressed and stressed about it.

I think it helps us, gives us a little laughter, makes us enjoy things other than basketball. We make each other laugh.

A lot of us are funny. Oh, my gosh, she's funny. We just make each other laugh. And you enjoy moments like that. We're sisters. It's more than just basketball, honestly.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I thought that was really well put. It's

more than basketball. It's a family thing, relationship thing. And when basketball is done, what are you going to have? You're going to have relationships. You're going to have people in your corner you can talk to and connect with. You're going to have a really good bond for life.

It's just something that relieves pressure off us as well. It's something to take your mind off basketball, knowing we all experience the same thing. Why not share it together?

I'm definitely going to cherish all the relationships I've created in this program and the girls. And we're just enjoying the moment, staying in the moment, just being present with each other.

Q. Raven, throughout your career, what have you been most proud of your growth off the basketball court during your career at South Carolina?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I think honestly overcoming adversity. Honestly I used to be a person that listened to naysayers and stuff like that, of how to critique me and stuff like that. I'm learning how not to care and learning that I'm a winner, like Coach said. I do whatever it takes to win. So, overcoming adversity and just know who I am and not put myself in a box.

Q. You picked it up against Duke in the second half. How important is leadership and how would that transition now in the Final Four?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It's super important. I mean, when your teammates are telling you to shoot the ball, you've got to shoot the ball. I felt like I didn't shoot the ball as much as I needed to before then.

They just needed me to step up and be there for them. And that's what I had to do, especially wanting to win. You've got to do whatever it takes to win. They told me to shoot the ball, so I went out there and shot the ball.

Q. The ESPN crew told us this morning that Dawn has been trying to point you guys in the direction of harnessing that underdog mentality coming into this weekend. What does that mean to you? And what does that look like this year when so many people think, well, South Carolina, the dynasty and defending champs, how do you become an underdog, how do you guys harness that mentality?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Honestly, I don't think we look at ourselves as underdogs. South Carolina, it kind of puts a little pressure off us a little bit. I think we're going to come, bring our A game.

All of us wants to win. Everybody here wants to win. We know they're going to come and bring whatever they have against us. So I think we just need to listen to our coaches because they game plan and execute what they have for us.

Q. If you could pick one fit from Coach Staley's closet what would you all pick?

DAWN STALEY: I wear too many clothes for these two. They don't have an appreciation for (indiscernible) clothed. These two, hu-huh.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: No, just her, (referring to Raven).

One that sticks out is probably her denim fit this year. I think it was a couple games ago. But the denim fit, it was nice.

RAVEN JOHNSON: All her Louis Vuitton stuff.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, all the Louis Vuitton. Hard fits.

Q. Every team has its own heartbeat. What's the heartbeat of this team?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Te-Hina Paopao. You.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: That's a good question.

Perseverance. I think we experienced a lot of things we didn't experience last year. Every time we lost or did something we learned from that opportunity and have grown from that opportunity.

I thought that heartbeat was just perseverance and how we got tougher and our toughness is going through battles together. And I'm just really proud of this team and we know that the job's not done. So I'm going to say perseverance.

Q. The Seatbelt Gang is something you latched on defensively. I think both of you are members now. Where did that start? Walk me how cool it is to be connected on the defensive end of the floor this time of year?

RAVEN JOHNSON: It recently started with Jaycee Horn with football, then Dijonai Carrington, during the WNBA she did something like this, and she said Seatbelt Gang.

So me and Breezy, we were, like, we're lock-down defenders. We need to be part of Seatbelt Gang. So we started, we're Seatbelt Gang. And Pao had four blocks.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I had a defensive moment.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Now she's part of Seatbelt Gang. Honestly it means, honestly don't come on our island when it comes to defense. When we're in front of you, just know you're going to have to make a tough bucket, honestly.

Q. So you obviously got Dawn Staley, one of the best guards to ever play the game. But you also have Jollette Law on the staff, an assistant coach who was an amazing guard in her own right. Both of you play the guard position. Both of you have to carry that mantel for the squad. What does she bring to each of you individually? And how has she helped you grow as basketball players?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Honestly, in every practice when she don't hear my voice she screams at me. I'm, like, all right, all right. That's enough, honestly.

I feel like her energy every day, it helps a lot. Not just even me not talking on the defensive end. I think a play off defense she's constantly in my ear, you cannot take a possession off.

You need a coach like that, honestly. I know she played with the Harlem.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Globetrotters.

RAVEN JOHNSON: -- I was like, oh, okay.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, she's a great coach. You hear her constantly through practice reminding us that we've got to talk. She's done a really good job with that.

Just her passing ability. I'm so amazed by it. She gives me pointers about it because I can be a better passer. But she's just been able to pour into me, pour not only as a basketball but as a woman as well.

It's really nice to have a coach like that in your corner.

Q. Coach Staley has talked quite a bit about how you react to change and implement that change. Can you both talk about in your personal games, how you have taken some changes and implemented it?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I feel Sweet 16, Elite Eight, we would to fight for some wins. They weren't easy. Definitely it wasn't cute. It wasn't pretty. So I feel like we had to dig in deeper and come out with a W. So honestly, just being together and staying connected.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: I agree.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. I heard your players talk about the heart and determination and things of that nature when you play somebody for a fourth time. Does much change for you and your staff in terms of how you prepare them based on a game in Greenville three weeks ago or the game in Austin, the game in Columbia? Is it an amalgam in terms of what you have to do in terms of preparing? Do you see much of a difference in those three games?

DAWN STALEY: Not much difference, besides you probably have to put a little bit more emphasis on being able to stay organized when they take your first and second option away. Most of the time it's what you call broken plays.

So we need to stay more organized in broken plays, because they do a really good job of making you go a little bit deeper into your offense. You've got to make sure that you know what we're doing and it's not just, you know, happenstance or chaotic.

It's more about that. But we're not going to stray too far left or right from the things that we've done that were positive that would help us.

And, knock on wood, we can identify the things that we did when we did get beat in Texas what those were that put us in a bad position.

Q. NIL has obviously changed a lot in college sports. There's a new era we presume with revenue sharing soon. How do you expect the revenue sharing to impact the types of programs that are capable of contending for Final Fours and championships?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I think you're going to need more -- if you look at the rev share and how much women's basketball programs will get, it seems like more than what you normally have to work with.

But when you compare it to some of the numbers that are being thrown at some of these young people, I don't know how they can operate in that space with rev share.

I know with us we have money that we've raised from donors in the NIL space that we're going to have to utilize all up before rev share takes place next week. So we have that to fill our roster and to go into the portal if there's somebody in there that we need to get.

But that pool of money is more than what we probably get

in rev share. So how do we give a figure out, like, today and then the rev share is this next year. And that doesn't add up. That just doesn't add up. It's just that it's always going to be something.

But we have done something creative. I think Texas, Duke, UCLA are all going to play in the Players Era tournament next year. And it's things like that will help in the NIL space because NIL and rev share are two different things. They don't really work hand in hand.

So it's a lot that you have to work through and you do need somebody on staff, which is more money to keep all the chaos organized, especially during a time like this, like we're in the Final Four. I'm talking to parents. I'm talking to people in the transfer portal. I'm talking to agents. It's a lot.

But if you're not someone that can easily pivot, this thing will swallow you up. We're fortunate that we've been working the chaos for a long time, that it just feels normal.

Q. You've had Breezy the past four years and the past two years she's been a starter and usually guarding the opponent's best player. What do you think of her defense, how has it improved and do you think she's underrated as a defender?

DAWN STALEY: She's definitely underrated as a defender. I think our game sometimes looks at stats. She's not one that's going to steal the ball. She's one that's going to get your top scorer shooting at an inefficient clip and that's her claim to fame.

I think over the years she's gotten more confident. She's gotten more intrigued with how to shut people down. Okay. If she does this -- she's asking a lot of questions about defense and positioning and what she should do in these situations.

And she's really locked in when it comes to that side because she knows that she's got to do her part. And her part is a big part that we rely on to get wins. And that's not scoring a whole lot of points. It's actually preventing our opponents from scoring a lot of points.

She's in my top five in my 25 years of coaching.

Q. You've emphasized that trust is kind of the baseline in terms of your ability to develop your players. I'm just curious, what are the biggest keys to sustaining that trust or growing that trust over a player's time at SC despite all the pressures and distractions that come with today's game?

DAWN STALEY: You have to condition young people to handle real communication. Because if it just happens once, you know, they're not going to get it. If it happens once and then another, a month later, they really aren't connecting the two.

So you have to address everything that's happening in front of them in real time. And then they'll get used to it. They may not like what you're saying. They may like what you're saying at times.

That's what builds trust. It's not, oh, I'm the head coach, listen to me. That's old parenting. It's the new-age parenting that's out here that kids have a say. They want to be listened to. They have something to offer you. And that is how they're thinking, how they feel and how they want to move and how they want to operate.

If it's within what we want to do as a program, carry on. But if it isn't, let's sit down and talk about some stuff, right?

It's just that. It's over and over and over again to where you condition them to listen and you condition them to have input. And that builds trust. Communication builds trust.

They're not in a place where we just leave them and say, hey, this is what I want you to do and that's it. And you know what they're going to do, they're going to go back to where they are. They're going to think about it. She doesn't think I'm this good. I can't do this. Hey, mom, this is what she said to me. Hey, friend, this is what she said to me.

Now I've got three people that's talking about the opposite of what I'm saying. I need the majority. I need the majority saying we're all saying the right things to the principal, our players are the principal.

That's how you build it. You build it with every person that has our players' ears, because it's a lot of them. It's a lot of people that they talk to and they listen to. And we want to make sure that we have the biggest voices in our players' heads.

Q. In the past, you've been very vocal about things to make the game better. Getting units is a step in the right direction and other things they fixed. Where do you think the health of the women's basketball is right now with ratings being pretty strong coming off of last year's monster numbers? Where would you like to be the next step to be for women's basketball, as one who has a loud and very strong voice in the game? What would you like to see getting better going forward?

DAWN STALEY: I would like for, since we're in this rev share space, our rev share -- well, our ability to bring in more revenue is increasing. So women's basketball has been held at a certain place. Now that rev share is a part of it, we're not considered a revenue-producing sport prior to us being in demand.

We're becoming a receive-producing sport -- not there yet. But the rev share dollars won't allow us more because it's based off of what happened prior to the decision on Tuesday, I think. So I would like to see us grow a little more in that.

Money talks. And the more money that we can produce, the more that we can ask for more. But we've been held down. Like, we've been held down for decades, to now we're in a good place. I think we need to go back to the table and talk about some things.

From a rev share, I think we need to continue to increase the units. I do think women's basketball needs its own television deal. I do. I think we need our own deal. And then we will really find where we are in our worth.

Q. You played against Vic's teams, both Mississippi State and Texas, I think five times for the SEC title. And in the 2017 national championship you won all those. Are there certain things you guys have been able to do well against his style of play? And how might that help in terms of going against them again tomorrow?

DAWN STALEY: We're both defensive minded. So it's probably we've had a bigger offensive spurt throughout those games that we've played that were at a higher stake, and I do think it's going to take that.

I mean, we're not going to rely on our success against them to say, hey, we beat them. I'm looking at the loss, you know, from this year and how we can prevent that. One, we've got to stay out of foul trouble and not have to adjust to -- the times that they beat us, it was foul trouble for us, like early foul trouble, where we had to change up how we just substitute. And that throws our cadence off. So I think it's just about our bigger offensive runs at any given time within the game.

Q. You talked about the transfer portal just being open during the tournament and you're fielding calls, you're doing a lot, also playing in a game. Do you anticipate having to hire someone to play GM? Is that a role that you think will become commonplace?

DAWN STALEY: Yes, it will. It's necessary. I don't know if we'll call it GM, but it will be some of the duties of a GM.

So yes, yes I think it's a lot of money in the space. It's a lot of moving parts that we need somebody singularly focused on that movement and the ways we need to navigate in that space. If we're here at a Final Four, the GM can be taking care of some of the stuff that we have to take on now.

I think it's cool, though. I like the fact that it's new and different. If you can get pretty creative and organized in this space, even amongst this chaos, you can really use it to help your program.

Q. Do you appreciate the juggle, coaching and --

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I've got ADD, so it stimulates me. It stimulates my ADD.

Q. What do you see in Madison Booker's game? What do you like about it and what problems does she cause?

DAWN STALEY: She's a bona fide scorer. Not even a bona fide scorer, she's a playmaker. She can score the basketball with the best of them. She can play multiple positions. So she's versatile.

She can facilitate. You know, she's a really good rebounder. She's a difficult match-up. Like, you really have to -- you know, you have to play her one and a half players. You can't just straight up play her because she has so much of a skill set that if you don't show whoever is guarding her and then show -- close her space off, because she's able to rise above. She's a big guard that can pretty much get her shot off at any given time. Then you've got to make her play defense. She's a willing defender, but with how much she needs to score for them, you have got to make her play on that other side of the basketball so that pretty jump shot isn't as pretty in minute 30 as it is in minute five.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports