

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

Saturday, April 5, 2025

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

## South Carolina Gamecocks Coach Dawn Staley

Finals Pregame Media Conference



**Q. As you know, Jose Fernandez is going to become the new president of the WBCA. Could you speak about your relationship with him, what he can bring to this role? And also for him, for you, for all the coaches, what are the things you want to see done in the next year for your association?**

DAWN STALEY: Jose's a great guy. Great guy. Dog lover. He probably has eight rescues. And he's been in our game a very long time. So you want somebody in that position that really loves our game, that served our game for a long time and somebody that's really going to move the needle.

What that looks like, I think is -- I'm not going to tell him how to do his job but there are certain things that we need. I don't know if he can get that, open up the negotiations for a new television deal would be nice. We need our own television deal so we can understand what our worth is.

I think, one, he also needs to find for more revenue-share dollars when it comes to women's basketball because we can't forget when this case was brought up, it was football. It's men's basketball and it was women's basketball. So any percentage that's less than what we deserve needs to be addressed if we're not getting it across the board.

**Q. Bree was just telling us that you have a very calm energy when you come into the locker room even when you guys are down. Has that always been your demeanor in your coaching career, or has that changed for you over your years?**

DAWN STALEY: It's changed over the years. I think it probably changed more of we've got better players, that's one.

I mean, they're better listeners. They really understand

and want just to win basketball games. It's not to say that when I was 20 years younger or 25 years younger, I had the energy to do it every game. It didn't work, really. I thought it was working, but it really didn't work.

You have to take the pulse of your team and how they take in information. I find that whatever moves our team, I'll do. If it takes a fire and brimstone, I'll give it to them. If it takes just me just saying these are three things that we need to adjust in the second half, they take it.

**Q. Can you reflect on what the past year has been like for Ashlyn Watkins and what you see the next step for her heading into her senior season?**

DAWN STALEY: We don't like talking about Ashlyn. One, because we're not a program that when we sustain a loss like that, that we're not hung up on that. But Ash's process has been going smoothly. She's off crutches, been off crutches for a while.

I think we've missed her at times but we don't like to bring that up because there's nothing that we can do about it. And the fact that we're here, the fact we're here without her is quite an incredible feat that is probably not talked about a whole lot because we don't talk about it a whole lot.

But to get her back, her athleticism, her shot-blocking ability, her ability to defend on the perimeter and inside, her ability to get to the basket and create her own shot.

So her journey back will probably get her back into a real flow. And her doctors might cringe when I say this, is probably midsummer, late summer -- for us. Not for them, but for us where we can do things and put our hands on her and actually work with her.

**Q. Te-Hina, Raven, Sania and Bree were freshman in 2022. They had a little bigger roles when you guys tried to repeat in 2023. Obviously they have a championship under their belt, but what are the biggest ways you've seen them grow --**

DAWN STALEY: They've got two.



**Q. Another one, yes, what are the biggest ways you've seen them be able to achieve that repeat?**

DAWN STALEY: I think that entire class is the epitome of sacrifice. They've sacrificed and learned while sitting or playing minimal minutes.

I know they're going to be great wherever they end up or whatever franchise they end up playing for in the WNBA because they took the necessary steps to have a deeper understanding of playing the role. And they're winners. Like, they're winners playing smaller roles, big roles.

They're playing the biggest role for us in this championship run. And I just can't be more proud because in this day and age to not play a whole lot means you're definitely going into the transfer portal, like it's a definite.

The way they just sacrifice and held out and now they position themselves of doing something that very few classes are able to do. And that's try to win a third. Proud of them.

**Q. Your players have talked about wanting another opportunity at UConn because of what happened the last time around. How much have you sensed extra fuel or motivation knowing they have a second chance and it comes in the national championship game?**

DAWN STALEY: I think the fuel is to win another national championship. That's where the fuel comes in. The challenge is great. They're playing great basketball. It's beautiful to watch. It's cringe-worthy to be their opponent, you know?

So there are things that we need to do to play a lot better than we played a month and a half ago.

But they're competitors. They're competitors. If they were any other way, they probably wouldn't be on our team.

**Q. This tournament started with 16 Black head coaches --**

DAWN STALEY: This tournament did? I didn't know that.

**Q. What is it like to know and be a part of, and to see it continue to represent in the championship game?**

DAWN STALEY: That's awesome. That is awesome. I didn't know. I usually go through and try to figure out -- a lot of times we're playing each other in the same region. Didn't happen that time. We're a little spread out, which is good, which allows us to -- allows a Black coach to be represented in the Final Four.

Truly representation matters because if we're not a part of the biggest stage of college women's basketball, sometimes that's used against us. So I'm glad I'm here representing that part of our game because we've got a lot of young people that look like us that need to see us in these situations.

Not necessarily have to go -- you don't have to come to South Carolina, but as long as you see it, you won't shy away from giving another Black coach an opportunity to get here and you helping her get here -- or him.

**Q. When you're talking about when you're bringing recruits in and they're coming in on visits and you're trying to get them to understand that there's a process here -- you might be on the bench for a couple of years, how much at this point --**

DAWN STALEY: I don't think we say.

**Q. You don't say that? Because last night you were talking about how you say we want to make you a pro, you might not be a starter in the WNBA. You're going to have a similar role here as you might in the pros. How much in terms of getting recruits to understand that and maybe accept that, want that, are you able to hand off to your seniors now, like someone like a Sania Feagin, like, talk to her, look at what she's doing now? Or do you disagree with the premise of my question maybe?**

DAWN STALEY: Here it is. When a young person comes into our program, the returners who have been there, they all know we start from scratch every year. It's not like we're coming in saying, hey, you're going to be a starter.

No, production is the key. Production is nameless. It's faceless. It's experience-less. Like, if you're a player and you're consistent with how you operate from June until two weeks before we open the season, like, those are the months that we're preparing who's going to be our starters, who's going to play an integral role in coming off the bench and creating depth for us.

It just so happens that it's really hard at this level. When you're our program and you're competing for a national championship, experience usually shows up. Take, for instance, Joyce, like MiLaysia, like Tessa. The two of them last year, you know, there was a buildup to what they were able to do in the championship run.

It's just how it plays out. A'ja Wilson. I've probably lost recruits because I'm never going to tell any young person that you're going to automatically start. Young people, you

need to bet on yourself. If you think you're that good, right, you don't need a handout. You just allow your work to speak for itself. If it finds you in the starting lineup -- nameless, faceless, production is the thing that matters.

So, I mean, I don't know if I answered your question, but that's how we operate. I just wanted to say that because I did do that when I was in my first couple of years of coaching. I started someone off of potential. It wasn't not nearly the hardest worker. Super talented. Backfired. Never do it again. The cream will always rise.

For us, if you're in the starting lineup, it's because you've consistently performed and practiced.

**Q. Raven was talking about as a little girl watching Breanna Stewart win four straight titles and how that might have felt attainable, and her now her being on the doorstep of a third and winning back-to-back. It doesn't make it any less surreal that you're here. Have you taken time to step back and appreciate this moment that South Carolina women's basketball is?**

DAWN STALEY: No, I haven't. I like real time. When you ask me, in the moment, I'll reflect on that, in this moment. But we have a job to do.

I will say Raven was the conductor in putting that class together, like, during the recruiting process. It was during the pandemic. Raven and I would talk. She would ask me who we were recruiting. She would be the first one to say, hey, you about to get a birdy. Like, she would tell me, you're about to get a birdy.

And then she described herself as Big Bird. She was going to be the last one to commit. She was going to get all her troops lined up and then Big Bird's going to bring it all home.

And Raven consistently said, we're going to win championships. And you're thinking like an 18-, 17-year-old young person, really doesn't know what she's saying because it's hard on the other side of this.

She's won championships in high school. So she was just speaking on what she really believed.

And although I went with it, I did in the moment because in recruiting you want to believe young people. And I'll be damned if it ain't come true that she's got championships on her resumé. And she's putting us in a position of winning a third in her class, which is quite incredible.

**Q. You guys, UConn the last couple of decades, last decade have dominated the sport well in winning**

**championships. I remember you spoke eloquently last year about Caitlin and how winning a title does not define a legacy -- you've seen yourself in the Final Four and didn't win it --**

DAWN STALEY: I hope this year goes the same way.

**Q. You have a player in Paige, one of the best in the country right now and has had an injured-plagued career, but you know her well. Could you just talk about her, what she's meant to women's basketball? And even if you guys do win tomorrow, how that won't define her as not being as good as others just because she didn't win a title, if that's what you believe?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, I'm going to tread lightly with this. Here's the thing, sometimes we create these narratives about great players -- Caitlin was one of them; Paige is one of them right now -- and we tend to forget the narrative about what our kids have been able to do and going for their third in four years.

So there's a sentimental narrative about Paige. A great freakin' player. Anybody would start their franchise with Paige because of her efficient way of playing, because she's a winner, because she cerebrally just knows the game, just has an aura about her. And she'll be the number one pick in the WNBA draft. And she'll be an Olympian. She'll be all those things.

But when you put a narrative out there, everybody sees that, and it puts us at a disadvantage, whether you want to believe so or not. Officials see it. It's all over TikTok. It's all over SportsCenter. It's all over all of that.

And she's a great player but just because you're a great player doesn't mean you need to win the national championship to legitimize it. Paige is legit. She was legit from the moment she stepped on this stage or prior to, in Minnesota.

Her career is legendary. She will leave a legacy at UConn whether she wins one or not.

I just want to put it out there. I can't not address it because it's happening. It happened to us last year. Everything was about Caitlin Clark and her legacy and her ability to win a national championship. Yet we were coming into this thing undefeated, doing something that's unprecedented at the time, because it's hard. It's hard. We find ourselves back here in a similar situation.

I want the sentiments to be about our players and what our players have been able to do -- equally, because there's room to do both. We can raise Paige up because she



deserves that and raise our players up because they deserve that. And that's not talked about enough. There's room for it in our game.

Room for Jose. Room for our game, for all of us to be covered. Let's not choose a history, one's history over another program's history. Let's not choose one player over another player's history because we're all creating history for our game.

**Q. You've talked a little bit about your relationship with Sarah Strong's mom's Allison Feaster you how you were on the same WNBA team. Obviously you can't refer that much because she's not on your team. But did you think a teammate of yours from the WNBA, you'd be playing against her kid? And how do you feel for her in this opportunity?**

DAWN STALEY: Great teammate, Allison. Great, great teammate. We had some historical moments together. When she had Sarah, she would tell me she's good. She actually didn't tell me she was good. Parents are a little different. They want to see them in certain situations.

As she got older and older, we probably came in a little bit late on Sarah. I think UConn was recruiting her much earlier in the process than we were. And probably that was the tipping scale that she already created really good relationships with Geno and C.D. and their staff members.

But being a teammate, I thought, would actually help us out a little bit more than what it helped us out. Like, we made history together.

But I'm super happy for Sarah. Sarah is -- Sarah, how do I say this? She might be, in the next three years, she might be the best player to come out of UConn. And those are strong words. I know Stewy won four, right.

But what she's able to do -- stay calm, the IQ is off the charts, the skill set off the charts. Big play after big play after big play. Such a great complement to an already skilled UConn team. I think she's the piece that puts it all together. She makes it all work.

**Q. You might have seen Paige more than any coach outside of the Big East during her career. I'm just wondering how you've seen her game change or if you've seen her game change over her career at UConn?**

DAWN STALEY: I think Paige's game changed when probably Geno kept challenging her to shoot the ball a little bit more. Her passing ability is A-1. And she's really a selfless player.

So I think her being a little more selfish has helped her game and helped her understand that passing to somebody that shoots less of a percentage than you probably not a good decision. So she's just being more aggressive shooting the ball.

**Q. For about a decade, from '95 to about 2007, it was UConn/Tennessee were the two super powers. For the last decade it's been you guys and UConn. Just wonder if you could talk about for women's basketball to have standard-bearer programs like that and two coaches who have done everything -- Olympic champions, national champions -- just what that means in the grand scheme?**

DAWN STALEY: It's hard to break into what Pat Summitt and Geno, what they've done in the time that they've served our game. Like, it's really hard to even be mentioned in that air.

But, I mean, we've been uncommonly fortunate because I do think we give hope to other programs that are up and coming to know that you can break in. You can break in.

I mean, it's hard because it's hard. Anything that you do and you have sustained success is really, really, really hard. But once you are able to understand what it takes to succeed there, it's a little easier because you know.

You know it earlier -- you know it earlier in the process than later in the process. I say because when you haven't won a national championship, you really don't know.

For years, for 17 years, I used that -- hey, come help me win a national championship. I didn't really know how to win. But when you've won, it's a little easier to identify what those things are to stay in the conversation of competing against those eras of talented, talented coaches and programs.

**Q. You talked about the elevation of Paige. But the entire UConn team -- Sarah Strong, Fudd, El Alfy -- this team, do you see any differences with this UConn team than the UConn teams of the past? And if so, what are those difference sa?**

DAWN STALEY: Carolina News as in South Carolina? And you're asking the questions about UConn. Who's story are you writing, man? (Laughs)

I think UConn, this is how they play. Like, this is normal for them. I think previous years really haven't been normal, from injuries to just not having depth as they normally have had.

I think they're just comfortable, comfortable in what they're doing. They know it's the very thing -- it's almost like you know what you need to be successful. We just talked about that. You know the type of players that you need -- and I'm speaking for UConn -- you know the type of system you want to run, you know what you need from a defensive standpoint. Like, they're hitting all of their marks when it comes to what a national championship looks like for them.

**Q. Could I ask you about a couple of validators in the program. You guys have now have been to five Final Fours. Someone can check me on my research, but I think only UConn and Stanford have gone. Even Pat Summitt's did not that. By that definition, in a COVID year, four-year school, that spans different contributors. I don't believe you have anyone who had minutes in the first of those five. Can you just take me through what that means to you? And related, you've won your national championships with a signature star, somebody who was headed to a lottery pick immediately following in some cases. What does it mean to the program to win a national championship if you can without that signature star?**

DAWN STALEY: Feagin is going to be a lottery pick. Sania Feagin, standing right here, right now.

I mean, it's the players. It's all about the players. It's all about the players' commitment to winning. I think when players understand, really understand that they're going to be pros, all the players that contributed to the success of our program over the past five years, they knew they were going to be pros.

So that's one less thing you have to worry about and that's one less thing that you have to talk them off the ledge because they get so antsy because they think every missed shot or every bad performance decreases their chance of becoming a pro. We know that's not true.

Once we get them to settle in on -- Zia Cooke was talking about the WNBA after her freshman year. After her freshman year. You shouldn't be worried about that.

In your senior year, you shouldn't even be worried about that because the work that you put in will say you're going to be a lottery pick.

And to be where we are, to be in the national championship game with the players that we have -- and no, we don't have a -- we don't have a real go-to player, like a real person you get the ball in their hands and they're going to playmake for you.

I think, to me, it's just old-school basketball where you're just playing to your strengths, and our strength is our depth, our ability to play together, to play linked up. And I think a staple for us has been our ability to defend because the offense will sometimes go off on a journey on its own. And our mainstay has been our ability to defend and come up with schemes that will help us through those stretches where we've got a lull from an offensive standpoint.

I think it's great. I mean, the three games in between yesterday and the first game, people thought we were just dead. The way we were playing, we can't win a national championship, we're not going to make it to a national championship game.

And it's something to say about players who have a belief in each other. I hope it gives hope to the other programs that you don't -- it makes it easier when you've got a go-to player for sure. But it's not an impossible thing to do if you don't. You just have to lean on each other a lot more because you don't have that go-to player.

**Q. Your name is synonymous with basketball, not women's basketball, basketball as a whole. When you were a young girl growing up, dreaming, working hard, could you ever have imagined that and the pivotal role you would play for so many people in accomplishing their dreams?**

DAWN STALEY: No. I think my joy just came from playing, just competing. It didn't matter if the stage was big or if the stage was just on a cement court in the middle of the Raymond Rosen housing projects where I grew up. I get the same type of emotion, energy and competitiveness, the drive, that, like, today or if I'm a little girl on that court playing with the guys, it's the same thing.

So the charge is the same. I'm fortunate that the game has really given me much more than I anticipated. It's probably because of how I sacrificed. I don't even think it's a sacrifice. I chose basketball. I chose basketball over everything. I chose basketball over going to proms. I chose basketball over hanging out with friends. I chose basketball, like, through it all. And in return, it's given me so much now. Probably a little socially inept because I chose it, right?

But the impact, when you're doing what you're supposed to be doing -- like, I'm living my purpose. I'm very comfortable in that. I know what I'm supposed to be doing, and fortunately I'm very fortunate that somebody saw something in me that I did not see in myself. I did not see coaching -- like, I did not see coaching in my life.

Yet when Dave O'Brien, the former, the late great AD at

Temple University, just saw something in me that I really didn't and he challenged me. That's the only reason why I got into coaching.

He challenged me to turn the Temple women's basketball program around. I had never been challenged in that way. Fortunately, for me, I was drawn to it. After that interview that I didn't know was an interview -- like, I didn't know it was an interview because I had never been on an interview. All my interviews were tryouts for basketball.

I got suckered into just coming there, meeting people. He's asking me to walk down the hall with him. He sits me in front, at the head table, this conference, 12 people sitting around the table. They're asking me what do I see myself doing in five years. I'm like, playing in the WNBA. They're asking me all these questions. I had no clue, y'all, because when you don't know, you don't know.

And I later found out that was the committee that was going to pick their next coach. Needless to say, I took the job two weeks later and that is 25 years later and I'm still, like, living my purpose.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports