

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Presbyterian vs South Carolina

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Bree Hall

Ashlyn Watkins

Media Conference

DAWN STALEY: We will, we're excited to get things started for us. We really enjoy watching Sacred Heart at Presbyterian last night. I thought they did a great job of trying to get to the next game.

Sacred Heart played their hearts out. Presbyterian did a great job at just making big plays at the end of basketball game and bringing a great crowd.

So it was kind of cool to see a big crowd in the play-in game. We look forward playing them as well as enjoying this atmosphere with our fans.

Q. Bree, what do you remember with the Presbyterian game from December? Does that give you guys a good feeling going into tomorrow?

BREE HALL: Yeah, they played really hard. Moved the ball really well. Their post players really good as well. Good guard play as well. Going into the game tomorrow I think we're level headed and just locked in.

Q. Ashlyn, with Kamilla out tomorrow, probably going to get more playing time than normal. What kind of opportunity do you have to have to build some momentum for the rest of the tournament?

ASHLYN WATKINS: I don't really know. She's going to be back, so it's not really like it's going to be forever.

Q. For you personally.



ASHLYN WATKINS: The whole tournament? I mean, it's going to be like a regular.

DAWN STALEY: What's regular, Ash?

ASHLYN WATKINS: Regular is -- I don't know. I don't think it's really going to make a difference. Yes, she's going to miss this game, but I'm going to just have to play.

Q. For Ashlyn and Bree again, how are these kind of I guess almost two weeks or week and a half off or away from games, what did you guys do during that time to kind of keep yourself sharp heading into tomorrow?

ASHLYN WATKINS: We had -- how many days did we have, like four days off. For me personally, I took some of those days off, but I did go in the gym maybe one time. (Smiling.)

But I was -- I really just chilled. I didn't really go anywhere. Just took some time just to myself with no basketball. But I still had school, so...

BREE HALL: I mean, away from the four days that we had off, the practices leading up to today have been good. We been very competitive. Lots of defense. You know, just getting back to how we been playing.

But coach, like I said, has been on us and making sure that we're perfecting the things we need to perfect.

Q. Dawn, what can you guys use from the Presbyterian game back in December that can help tomorrow or do they look like an entirely different team than a few months ago?

DAWN STALEY: They do. They look confident. Any time you play somebody once, the second time around you feel much better.

I think the novelty has worn off of us playing each other. So, I mean, I'm excited just to get things started. Excited that they advanced because they brought a lot of fans in Colonial Life arena last night. I mean, I had a chance to meet with them as well, prior to their game. I think it was



Tuesday night.

Just great being a part of their NCAA tournament appearance. They're excited. They're not going to back down, which I like. But I mean, we're home. We got a job to do and got to play well and get off to a great start.

Got to fine tune some things that haven't been working for us probably over the past couple weeks, so hopefully the fact that we got a little bit of rest and we ramp back up, that we can get off to a good start.

Q. For you this season the ball has bounced your way a couple times in a good way. What do you think is it about your team that has given ya'll that air of inevitability?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we work hard. We're a hard working team. I don't think we're a team that shortcuts anything. Not a coaching staff that shortcuts anything.

Sometimes the basketball gods favor that. I think preparation has allowed us to get lucky sometimes, and that helps.

And I think our players play free. Like they play as if there are no consequences, and that's a gift and a curse for someone like me. Like I like the prep. I like to make sure that we are contributing to the outcome of each and every game.

I know they do. But if you have a conversation with them, it's like, you got to have a short-term memory. Only think about the winning part of it. Don't really think about how we won or how we you could have lost.

So it's worked for this team thus far. I don't know if it'll work throughout the tournament. So that's where we come in and just try to give them the -- jolt them into feeling a little bit of what we're feeling as coaches.

Q. Same question I had for Ashlyn: What would it mean to get a big game from her tomorrow to boost her confidence going into the rest of the tournament?

DAWN STALEY: She needs to play well. She really does. She needs to get back to the Ashlyn of old, dominating on both sides of basketball.

For us, like for us, for her, she's over the course of this season found a strong voice in our locker room and on or bench. When she's engaged in that way, we're a much better basketball team. When we don't hear it, we're not as good.

Q. I know you said it was unfortunate that Sania's time with ya'll was so short. Any other thoughts as she officially enters the portal now?

DAWN STALEY: No. I wish her well. I mean, she's allowed me to be a part of that process, finding another school that fits her and will welcome her.

Once you're a part of our family, you'll always be a part of our family whether you stick out the four, three, two, I don't know how many years you could possibly be in our program, but she's always -- she'll always have me as a resource, so...

Q. Couple years ago you and I talked for a story about the preferences of the marketplace for a certain type of athlete, or an athletes looking a certain way. Given the success in that marketplace that MiLaysia has had, what are your thoughts on the meaning of that moving forward for women's basketball?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I just feel like women's basketball is in a super great place where everybody is welcome. If you can play, they look at your ability to play first now.

If you take MiLaysia for instance, I think she's probably -- I would say she is the player that our fans stay in their seats the longest, because they don't know what she's going to do and they anticipate her wowing them every second of every game.

You know, for that, she has -- I appreciate that part of her. Like I really do because she handles it extremely well. I don't think she really knows the power of her play, that impacts not -- I mean, it's her community because she's from here but it impacts our entire game that's probably not being told.

It's being told here locally but probably not nationally.

Q. I'm guessing you didn't spend a lot of time talking with your players about what happened at the end of the LSU game up in Greenville. How did you address that or did you address that quickly and then move on? Was it fair that Kamilla is the only one going to miss a game --

DAWN STALEY: Yeah.

Q. -- and nobody else? How do you see that?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, obviously we talked about it immediately. I don't let things linger. You hit it, and then you move on. You talk to each and every player. I didn't

talk to them individually. Talked to them as a team and went through why it happened and what we need to do differently if presented with that circumstance.

And then obviously I talked to everybody. The commissioner, Tiffany Daniels, I talked to Lisa Mattingly. I talked to all of them. It does have the appearance of just Kamilla takes the fall for it. Did she deserve it? Yes. She deserved to be disqualified. No doubt about it. But there were some other parties that should have been penalized.

I don't know penalized to the point of disqualification, but definitely ejection for that particular game. I know how they came -- well, they assessed it, and if they had to do our all over again I do think they would come up with something different.

But it leaves Kamilla hanging.

Q. Totally different question or topic. A lot of coaches -- and if you get to this point obviously you're happy. You want to get to the NCAA tournament. The new realities of our sport, NIL and portal, does it make your job less satisfying or more of a challenge? How do you deal with in the changes?

DAWN STALEY: Well, I'm drawn to challenges, so bring on, whatever it is. The portal just opened up on Monday. Selection Sunday was on Sunday. You have to juggle all of these things. Couple of our players got some NIL deals that just hit the press.

I mean, it's a new way of coaching, and if you don't have strong relationships with your team it makes it really really hard to be able to do all those things. If you don't have a strong staff that has a strong connection with your team, it gets hard because you're -- you know, you're thinking about who is going to jump in the portal, how you prep for NCAA tournament.

For me, I would be surprised if any one of our players decides to get in the transfer portal. Not from lack of playing time or anything like that. It's just how they're treated. They're treated like professionals. They're treated -- they're communicated with. They're listened to.

I think it's cool. I think we've as a staff prepped for times like these. That's a Meek Mill, a play off a Meek Mill song. Ya'll don't know you nothing about that. (Laughing.)

Q. You've been coaching with Boyer for so long. Talk about her impact on the program.

DAWN STALEY: Boyer and I are an old couple. Seriously. We've definitely taken years off our lives. I've

taken some off hers and she's taken some off mine.

But at the end of the day, there is not a coach that works harder, not one coach that works harder that I know.

When I want to not think about basketball, she's always thinking about basketball, things that I'm not particularly thinking about. We got a great balance of what it is to appreciate the game. Like we love the game. I don't think -- well, I know -- that I would not have been as successful without her expertise, her tirelessness, her -- I mean, she thinks about every single thing.

It's really satisfying and comforting to know that Boyer is like right by my side. If anybody says or does anything to me, watch out. I don't have to say a word. Boyer will. Even if it's one of us family members, Gamecocks. Boyer will come to the rescue. She's my rider. She's my rider all the way through. Thanks for the question.

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