

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - North Carolina vs South Carolina

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

MiLaysia Fulwiley

Tessa Johnson

Media Conference

South Carolina - 88, North Carolina - 41

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Dawn Staley student-athletes MiLaysia Fulwiley and Tessa Johnson.

DAWN STALEY: Super excited we got a chance to play in our building. Obviously the energy that our fans inserted into the building really, really helped us get out to a fast start. And other than a small portion in the third quarter, I thought we put together and executed a nice game plan.

Q. Tessa, I know you had a tough day Friday. Do you feel like you had a breakout coming? And how much did it help to see that first shot go through to get the ball rolling?

TESSA JOHNSON: I think what helped was my teammates telling me to keep shooting and forget everything that happened, no matter what happened just keep shooting, and my coaches.

DAWN STALEY: She was a plus-49 on Friday. Although she didn't make a shot, she led our team in plus-minus.

Q. These moments aren't supposed to be -- are supposed to be too big for freshmen like yourselves who or here starting out. How do you overcome that? And does it even matter what people think as to how you perform?

TESSA JOHNSON: Again, I keep saying it, our teammates, they keep encouraging us no matter what, just play us. No matter what, just keep playing our game, no



matter if we're freshmen or not.

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I think this team, we do a great job of just playing for each other. I think we don't play for the fans and all the other extra stuff. I think everything we do out on the court is for each other.

Q. MiLaysia, you were just all over the place -- offense, defense. Tell me a little bit about your game plan today and what you wanted to get going into the game?

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: When I step on the court, my main focus is usually defense. Once I'm playing good defense and I get good steals I feel my offense flows and comes to me. I was excited I got to be out there and get some stops on the defensive side and do some great things on the offensive side as well.

Q. (Indiscernible) mentioned yesterday you all felt like you would see them in November. They were physical and more energetic from the punch. How important was it to set a tone immediately with the full-court press and what you all did in that first quarter specifically?

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I feel like we came out there being very aggressive, just matching their energy. Last time I thought they caught us off guard with their aggressiveness. Today I felt we did a great job matching that energy on both sides of the basketball for the whole four quarters. We did great.

TESSA JOHNSON: I agree, and we really emphasized on defensive possessions, mainly, and like Lay said, it would flow into our offense.

Q. What does it feel like going to the Sweet 16? Not everybody gets this chance?

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, growing up I was always like, wow, I want to play in the NCAA Tournament. Being here, it's amazing. I can't express my feelings, but it's amazing.

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: Same. Word for word. (Laughter).



Q. Can you speak of just your success under the boards today? You guys had 54 rebounds. What led you to have that advantage, especially on defense?

MILAYSIA FULWILEY: I feel like we definitely emphasized just boxing out and crashing the boards. I felt we did a great job of just boxing out. If the person who boxed out who didn't get a rebound, the other man, it was able to open up the floor for us to get rebounds.

Just all the small things, intangibles, really helped us get the rebounds. I mean, 54 rebounds, which is kind of crazy. I didn't know.

TESSA JOHNSON: I mean, she said it, but one of our keys to the game was boxing out and rebounding. And comparing to last game, they got a lot of second chances. So we had to, again, emphasize it and do our job.

Q. Was that the best first half your team played this year? If not, was there anything else that comes to mind that you can compare it to?

DAWN STALEY: I don't know. We haven't played like that in a super long time. We actually were talking about that in the coaches' locker room, like, we haven't played well all together. Every single of our players made an impact coming into the game.

And we needed a performance like this. And hopefully this playing this good of basketball can be contagious throughout the rest of the way.

I thought we did a great job of just being aggressive on both sides of the basketball, just locking in to make sure that this wouldn't be our last game.

Q. I knew a few years ago we had Aliyah and (indiscernible) to talk to them when they were freshmen. But how unusual is it that it's freshmen who are kind of pushing things and leading the way these past few games?

DAWN STALEY: I think it's the theme of women's basketball at this point, where you've got a lot of young players who are coming in and making an impact. They grew up watching the NCAA Tournament. They grew up watching WNBA.

So to get their opportunity to play on a big stage, they prepared themselves for it. And, I mean, it's the right situation. All the freshmen, all the freshmen that are in the national spotlight, they picked good situations in which they can shine.

Although this is a different kind of shine for MiLaysia and Tessa, even Chloe, they see themselves as being integral parts of our success. And they didn't back down from it.

They could have easily -- they didn't look like this in June. They build up to it. And they don't have to be receptive to it as well.

But I think just the whole group, the whole entire group allows them to just play their game and be held accountable for not playing their game. So I think it's a cool dynamic to our team.

Q. You've talked about the MiLaysia's progression all season. What did you see from her today in her maturity and how she was playing all around?

DAWN STALEY: I think with MiLaysia, one, she didn't want to have the type of performance she had the first time that we played. I think she has something to prove to herself, and something to prove to the game.

I think she's wired that way. MiLaysia is super smart. Some of the stuff she does out there, I thought her passing up an opportunity to go score, to give it to Breezy so Breezy could see the ball go in. Like that, little type stuff, is incredibly -- like she's aware, she's aware of situations that you really don't think her young mind is really thinking about.

And she performs the way she does, like she's not afraid of the moment no matter if she's playing well or not. She's not afraid to make mistakes. She doesn't like to look bad, but she's unafraid to make mistakes. And for that we are honored that she chose to make the mistakes and correct them on Gamecock ground.

Q. When you're up by that many points, especially in a fourth quarter, what's the balance between wanting to stay engaged and maybe not pushing too hard or feeling like you're running up anything but also keep the team engaged?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, at this point we want to play good basketball. We didn't want to run up the score, but we certainly did not want to let our foot off the gas because it's hard, it's hard to lose momentum and then to gain it back.

So, no, we were just trying to execute because it was a different set of players out there that's trying to execute. So they have to utilize the time that they get just in case we need them in the situation where they need to play on both sides of the basketball and execute what we need to

execute.

So it isn't really about the score, it's about how it looks and what we're doing to stay productive.

Q. How aware were the players of the narrative, the tough narrative that North Carolina gave you the last couple of games and they wanted to make sure that they got a working lead and kept on building?

DAWN STALEY: Super important. I think we watched some of the clips of that game and saw how physical things were. I mean, I don't think we handled them well. I thought they out-aggressed us. They didn't want that to happen. No matter how it looked, whether we were efficient or not, they did not want it to look the way that -- or perform the way that they performed.

I thought the officiating was great, actually, just to be able to allow both teams to play physical but yet, if it got a little bit out of hand, they were in control of it, they were ahead of everything and they were communicative, and I really appreciate that part of it.

Q. What did you like from Kamilla today? And do you feel she handled the one-game absence well and was back in usual form?

DAWN STALEY: Kamilla had a hard time with it, to be honest. She felt like she let her team down. She's almost embarrassed by not being able to play. No matter how much we tried to shake her out of it, only basketball, only getting back out there and running up and down and hearing the ovation from the crowd, even got her a little emotional at the beginning of the game, she is -- I mean, she's a kind-hearted person. And it was so much unlike her. So I'm happy that she got over that part of it and now we can move on, and we'll be at a neutral site and she can just kind of focus in on what she needs to do to help us continue to win.

Q. Can you speak to the dynamic of you bench -- you had 51 bench points today -- and how important you feel that your bench will be contributing as you make this deep run?

DAWN STALEY: Super proud. One of our keys is always bench production. The amount of rebounds and points that they can accumulate as well as just being able to hold serve defensively in what we want to do.

I have the utmost confidence in our bench. We've put them in a position to play all season long. So what they're doing right now is not a surprise. It was built that way from the very beginning, and now they're seeing just some of

their patience pay off in a big way.

Q. Talking about SEC defenses. You have the best SEC defense in the country. Why is it a lot of teams in the SEC rest their laurels on defense? Why do you think the SEC has built this culture on defense, and what's distinctive about SEC defense?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's the fabric of who we are as a conference. We know that from time to time your offense is going to fail you at some point because the defense is so good that you either have to make it an emphasis to defend or else you're going to have a lot of lopsided scores, because our coaches are pretty darned savvy.

They come up with some incredible schemes defensively just to throw us off balance. And I do think -- I've said this for a very long time, even before we won our national championship -- the SEC prepares you to win national championships with how we guard, with our ability to score, because we know we're being -- if you're able to score against the SEC, you're doing something pretty good. You're pretty disciplined to working your offense because you're not going to always get your first or second option.

So you've got to be super disciplined to staying the course offensively. So I'm happy that I get a chance to work in the SEC because it puts us in a position to advance at least to the Sweet 16.

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