

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

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Te-Hina Paopao

Chloe Kitts

Media Conference

South Carolina 64, Indiana 53

DAWN STALEY: Just want to say congratulations to Indiana for making it to the second round and giving us a hard-fought game. We knew coming in it would be very similar to the basketball that was displayed out there for the last two hours.

Proud of our team, the way they gutted up and didn't flinch. It wasn't pretty, but at this time, it doesn't have to be. You've just got to score more points than the other team and work the kinks out as we advance into the tournament.

Q. Pao, four blocks today. Where did that come from? Did you think the team really needed it at that point?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, y'all see that? I'm really proud of myself. I had more blocks than threes today, but that's okay, I thought today was more of a defensive mindset for myself. The scouting report was she's a really good player, so I didn't want to let me team down. I'm part of the seatbelt gang now, so I'm really proud of that, as well. I just have to carry that defensive mindset throughout the tournament, as well.

Q. For both Chloe and Pao, what happened in the first half, and how did you turn the switch in the third quarter?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: The first half, I feel like we were over thinking a lot of things, we weren't keeping it simple, and I feel like when we keep things simple and do what we do we play great basketball. We were rushing a lot of shots and weren't locked in on making lay-ups today, and at



halftime, we told each other we're good, keep it simple, make lay-ups and find the open person.

CHLOE KITTS: Exactly what she said. We were all just missing our easy lay-ups, and there wasn't really flow in the game, and then second half we turned it around.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Oh, and getting stops, as well. Very key.

Q. Looking ahead to the Sweet 16, how are you planning to attack that process of getting prepared, especially with a few days off? Is there anything specific you want to work on in film or practice?

CHLOE KITTS: We have one day off, so we don't have a few.

We're just going to watch our film and do what the coaches say for our scout. We're all super excited and we know we need to take one game at a time.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Yeah, what Chloe said, we're going to take tomorrow off, I think. I don't know. I'm assuming. But we've just got to get our minds right, get our bodies right. We've got to rest and recover. It's going to be a long stretch for us, so we've just got to be prepared, be disciplined and get ready for our next game.

Q. When you talked amongst yourselves at halftime, was there one person who said something? Was it a group effort? Who really spoke up?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: Good luck with that answer.

CHLOE KITTS: Me.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: No, it was me. I just told the team, let's keep it simple. I think we were second-guessing ourselves. When we play team basketball, we play great basketball, and it's really fun to play great basketball. Coach says good basketball is going to reward you, and that's what happened coming out of the third quarter.

That's the mindset. We've just got to keep it simple and do



what we do.

CHLOE KITTS: I mean, Pao just calmed us down, exactly what she said.

Q. For each of you, Chloe, what does it look like when Pao does calm everybody down? Is it vocal? Walk me through what is like?

CHLOE KITTS: She's become more vocal over time, but I feel like just her presence calms us down like when she's in the game with us, just playing with her just feels so much more calm out there. I've talked to a couple of my teammates, and we all kind of feel the same?

Q. Pao, you've talked about the emotions of you knew this was going to be your last game in CLA regardless. When you're down fighting back versus when you hit that three with three seconds left on the shot clock, just the wave of emotions, is it trying to stay steady, or do you allow yourself to go up in those moments?

TE-HINA PAOPAO: You've just got to stay calm and be consistent. You can't go too high with the highs and too low with the lows. When you've got a team like us, they trust you. They have confidence in you. When you play for Coach, she does a really good job with that and putting her trust in you. Shout-out to the fans. You all made my experience here so much fun. I'm super blessed, and it's been a fun experience so far.

Q. Following up on this, this was your last game in Colonial Life Arena. Walk me through your emotions of playing for the fans one last time.

TE-HINA PAOPAO: It was fun. When we had that stretch in the third quarter, it was so loud and just being able to play in front of fans like that just makes the experience even more better. I cherish the moments that we had today, and I'm just super proud of our team and just -- we've just got to keep pushing, and shout-out to the fans for always showing support and love.

Q. Dawn, you mentioned the good luck without the voice in the huddle. What did you mean by that? Is there one player? Is it a group effort to talk to them in those moments?

DAWN STALEY: Well, they just told me Pao calmed them down, but I'm sure it was amongst nine to ten other voices talking. It's just a day care. That's what I'm referencing. It's not like a board meeting where there's one person talking at a time. It is chaos.

I was glad to see they actually stopped and listened to her

because what she says is coming from being an experienced player that's been through this process, and we need her voice.

Q. Dawn, how did you feel about that first half, and were you sure they would find their stride in the third quarter?

DAWN STALEY: Yes. I mean, it's a little unnerving because it's not how you envision execution. I thought we were getting great looks. They just wouldn't fall.

For us, if we're going to get the same type of looks, we're probably going to be in good shape because we're not going to -- Chloe and Feagin aren't going to be -- I think they were 0 for 10, and then I think Joyce made one lay-up, and that was off of a broken play. Lay got a steal and tossed it back to her and she made -- like, we're a very efficient post group of bigs, so sooner or later, somebody is going to get on course to do what they normally do.

I think we settled in. I think our defense got a lot better in the third quarter and afforded us a lead to the point where we just held on and got the win.

Q. Paopao, her defense today, what did you think of those four blocks and stepping up, especially in the first half there?

DAWN STALEY: Pao's defense was great. It was executed to a T. That young lady, I don't want to butcher her last name, we just call her Shay. Shay does a really good job going left. She is unconscious going left. She is super efficient, and Pao just sat on her left hand, forced her right. I think she got 12 points, but she would have gotten a lot more if she would have got into the flow of going left.

I thought she did a great job. We told her that in the locker room. I'm happy that we're helping to complete Pao, because for the longest, her reputation is she can just flat-out shoot the ball. She's a consummate point guard, and I don't think her defense gets enough credit in the past two years that she's been with us because it's gotten better and better and better, and then she had performances like she did today.

Q. You saw a lot of points from your veterans. Talk to me about how big that is, especially in this time of year.

DAWN STALEY: It's huge. I mean, we have to lean on our most experienced players. They've been here before. They've done it time and time again, through being on the court or just seeing it from sitting on the bench. That is experience, being in these situations.



I really don't want to -- we don't take any of that for granted. We didn't think we were just going to walk over two opponents in the first and second round, but getting to a Sweet 16 is hard. It's hard, and to do it in as many consecutive years as we've done it, it doesn't get old. It's not taken for granted, and we cherish the opportunity to move to the second weekend in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. What have you found is the best process for getting your players and your coaching staff ready from round to round of the NCAA Tournament?

DAWN STALEY: I think it's really important to balance the rest part of it, balance the active recovery, balance the film sessions and balance really how much the players are locked in.

We read the room when it comes to them. If they're focused in, our time on the court is probably cut in half. If they're not, we'll probably have more film sessions. Like, we didn't even -- I think we did one drill yesterday where we just went up and down. It was at the very beginning, it's a conditioning drill we do every day before a game, and then everything was just half court, just making sure we're able to execute what we need to execute.

They are a fine oiled machine. They run their stuff. They execute it. They've got you working on both sides of the court when we're on defense. Just well-rounded and calculated and deliberate in what they want to do, so they're exhausting. I know our players are exhausted.

But it takes that to beat a team like Indiana.

Q. Going back to what you said about Pao's defense, could you provide some behind-the-scenes perspective of how she's developed the last two years with it, because a lot of it isn't what we see on the court.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's developed over the past two years probably from her being targeted. They go after her. They put her in ball screen actions. They target her to be able to defend. They wear her out so her shot isn't as fluid in the third and fourth quarters. And then, you get tired of hearing it, hey, Pao, you're up. They're coming after you. You hear it over and over again.

And then we give her ways in which you can decrease the amount of times that people are getting what they want on the floor. She's taking heat and just getting better.

We're a culture of playing defense, and if you don't play it, you stick out, and Pao is not one that wants to stick out in

that way.

Q. The players were talking a little earlier about the atmosphere from the fans. At the send-off today I talked to one lady who's from Florida who has season tickets who comes for every game, people who came from North Carolina, people who came from Georgia. What do you want to say about the commitment? They talked about the controversy in Greenville about possibly wanting to move to a neutral location, and their point today was fans will travel from outer space, Paris, wherever, but the atmosphere that they created today is what I really want you to address.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's like no other. The unity that's created in this building, and we do take that act on the road. It's quite incredible. It's overwhelming. It's so much. It's so good that trying to describe it, it does it a disservice.

But they were loud in that third quarter. They had the energy. They were trying to force us into playing to our habits, even in the first quarter and the second quarter.

What we've been able to do, it's not a -- you can't look into a marketing scheme because it's not that. It really isn't. If it's that easy, everybody would be doing it. We would bottle it up and we would sell it to the next basketball program.

But it is them creating it, them buying -- you'll hear a season ticket holder buying 10 other season tickets to bring other people in, and those other 10 will become season ticket holders. It's just a trickle-down effect to the point where this is really the place to be when it comes to women's basketball. It's entertainment. It's developing and creating friendships. It is unified.

You look into our arena and you can see every seat filled, and it's of every background, like every single ethnic background. I think that is probably -- I mean, we've won National Championships, but I would say that we've been champions in uniting people, and that is super proud -- like, that's the thing that I'm most proud of. That's the thing that's kept me here for 17 years. To walk away from what we've built here would be extremely hard, like extremely hard.

I think it's just unmatched.

Q. Dawn, you talked about all your players at halftime chattering to be heard and make sure they get their voices there. That was a lot of what we heard last year where maybe they didn't know what they didn't know yet. Do they have that same quality? Is there a little harder edge because they are defending national

champions?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, some of it makes sense now. It does. Like, some of it is things that we really have to do to lock in on getting a win. Like, there are things that they discuss that create separation for us or there are things that we're doing positively that we must continue to do. So you'll hear that.

But you still hear, like, 13 voices talking at the same time. They've probably conditioned themselves to be able to compartmentalize and just hear everything and know the gist of what the chaos is. But it sounds like chaos to us.

Q. Indiana is a program that's been close to your level in recent years, No. 1 seed a few years ago, obviously pushed your team the last couple years. From your perspective, what do you feel like has kind of kept them from taking that next step? Is it more just rolls of the dice, luck of the draw, or do you see a bigger difference between a program like theirs and a program like yours?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, Teri can coach. She can really coach. She does a really great job at getting her players to play to their strengths.

Obviously, some of it is luck. Some of it is matchups. Like, it really is, when it comes to the NCAA Tournament.

I think you just have to keep plugging. She's got the talent. She's got the assistant coaches pool of people. You've just got to get lucky. Just got to get lucky.

Q. The last time you were down at halftime was that loss to UConn in February. I know you and Te-Hina already talked about it a little bit, but what was different this time in the locker room to pull you guys back in the game? Did you need to say anything? Was it just a look? Or was it entirely player led?

DAWN STALEY: I think when we're down at halftime, which is not very often, you want to keep the same energy that you have when you're up. They know, like, they really know, we've got an experienced group of players that really know what needs to take place in order for us to correct what was going on out there. Part of it was just we missed good shots. Part of it was we missed bad shots. Part of it was our defense wasn't hitting on all cylinders.

But over time -- like, the game is 40 minutes. I think within that time frame, we can get to our good habits, and we did that coming out of halftime. In the third quarter, we got a chance to get Chloe on the floor, keep her on the floor a little bit longer than we did in the first half.

She actually -- when she got her second foul, she was like, I was ball pressuring. You were not only ball pressuring, you were fouling. Like, stay in the game, Chloe.
(Laughter).

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