

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Tessa Johnson

Raven Johnson

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: First up today are the South Carolina Gamecocks. They are 31-3 overall, went 15-1 in the SEC. They were the regular season champions in the Southeastern Conference, the number one seed in the Sacramento 4 Regional.

Today we're joined by head coach Dawn Staley and student-athletes Raven Johnson and Tessa Johnson. Coach, if you would, please make an opening statement.

DAWN STALEY: I'm excited during this time of the season. The NCAA Tournament is an exciting time. It was good to have Samford and Southern and USC and Clemson here visiting Colonial Life Arena. I hope that they enjoy the experience.

Q. Good morning, everybody. For Raven and Tessa, both of you, every season you have been here, you've made the Final Four. Not the case with everybody on your team. Is there anything in that experience in your personal experience that you can help translate to help them understand the goal and what you guys want to achieve?

RAVEN JOHNSON: Winning, honestly. In March it gets hard. I say we want to focus on it one game at a time. Just being in the moment where our feet are, just taking one game at a time and believing in each other and holding, like we had this video in the beginning of the season where we had each other's hands and not letting anyone in our circle, so.

TESSA JOHNSON: Going off of that, I think everyone came here because they wanted to win. So like Raven



said, winning. We all have that same goal and I think just knowing that, like Raven said, just being able to stay with where our feet are and taking it one game at a time.

Q. Raven, Tessa, how have you used the week off to get ready to kind of recharge after the SEC Tournament? What did you do to refocus and get ready?

TESSA JOHNSON: I think everyone's way of doing that is their preference. Me personally, I took a lot of time to rest my body and kind of just mentally get back there. The tournament is different out there, so just being able to refocus in and, yeah, I did a lot of praying.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Praying for sure. Getting my mind right. Just coming off a loss, you really don't want to see that or feel that feeling, especially playing for Coach Staley. I think she's doing a really good job of what she's doing in practice for us, just getting us ready for March, but getting my mind right, just getting ready for March, so.

Q. Tessa, a year ago you told me you don't really like the Tournament Tessa nickname because it sort of implies you're not playing up to that standard the rest of the season. I promise you this is the only time this post-season I will ask you this. Do you feel like you shed that this season by playing consistently throughout the year?

TESSA JOHNSON: I feel like I have been playing a little more consistent. I feel like I could always do better, but I looked at the name Tournament Tessa a little bit differently now and I kind of switched my perspective and feel like I'm able to get ready for the tournament also.

Q. You say you switched your opinion on it. Does that mean you still have another gear for the tournament this time around?

TESSA JOHNSON: I guess we'll see. (Laughter)

Q. Raven and Tessa, you both said the players on this team who came here, they came here to win and kind of keep the culture moving forward. How have you



seen them kind of adjust, blend in, take steps to make sure that this March is the March that you guys want to have?

RAVEN JOHNSON: I could say it gets hard, it does get hard, especially when you're experiencing something for the first time it gets hard. You have to fight through those things and I think each player on this team has fought through the adversity, fought through hard times, and just leaning on teammates.

Leaning on coaches also. They're going to be ready when their number is called. They're going to be ready whenever the moment is. So like I said, I think Coach is preparing us well in practice for when those moments are going to happen.

Q. What was it like, Raven and Tessa, for each of you when you made your first Final Four? And I guess Raven you were injured that first year. Maybe the second time that you got there and were part of the team, what was it like to follow through on something that you wanted?

TESSA JOHNSON: It was good. It's something that I want the other girls to experience, so the plan is to get there, but like we said earlier, we're going to take that one game at a time.

Q. For both players, when somebody on the floor makes a mistake, we see Coach Staley turn to the bench and yell at everybody on the bench (laughter) as if the people on the bench had something to do with what went wrong on the floor. When she does that, what do you -- how do you respond?

DAWN STALEY: I haven't done that in a long time. (Laughter)

TESSA JOHNSON: Maybe the fact that we're all in it together. No, it's just holding each other accountable. I don't even know how to answer that question. I don't know.

DAWN STALEY: I haven't done that in a long time. Come on, now. You're digging, Chris.

TESSA JOHNSON: Yeah, I don't be noticing that.

DAWN STALEY: I don't think I have this year.

RAVEN JOHNSON: No, you scream a lot. You scream a lot now.

DAWN STALEY: I scream a lot now? (Laughter)

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, especially in the huddles. A good scream.

DAWN STALEY: I guess they don't know how to answer that question.

I'm actually screaming at the things that you're doing.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah? I honestly just smile and laugh and I just go back out there and try to not dwell on the mistake that I did. So, yeah.

Q. For Raven and Tessa, eventually you want to get to the WNBA. Have you guys followed any of these negotiations and what's ahead out there and what you may be able to take part in in a couple of years? The salary structure, things that are improving in the league?

RAVEN JOHNSON: God's plan. You just got to leave it up to God. I'm not going to lie to you. I let go let God. Can't really stress about things like that. Control what you can control and leave it up to God. But right now I'm focused on winning this March Madness and all the other stuff will take part.

DAWN STALEY: So the answer is no. They really don't understand what's happening, but what's happening is incredibly historic, right? I actually was supposed to tell them a little bit about what has taken place over the last 48 hours, and that is people have fought.

When you enter into the league, you're going to make probably a hundred times, 75 times more than someone that was 30 years ago, ten years ago, five years ago, you're going to make much more money than their number one pick and we have had two of them in Aliyah and A' ja.

Like more money than they made in their rocky year and over the course of your career in the WNBA it is probably now a little more generational wealth if you do the right things with it. This coming up, line, you're coming out at a great time. Good thing you came back, Raven. (Laughter) Really. It's lucrative.

Q. Would that eliminate the need of having to play sees more so?

DAWN STALEY: The WNBA will make you make a choice because you have to be on time in training camp. It's worth it now. It's worth it to actually have your body recover and just play in the WNBA season. But I will say, the player's association and all the officers in the player's association have really just beared down and fought for

their worth and the worth of their current players as well as the future and there's not oftentimes that you get what you want and I don't know if they got everything they want, but there were principle things that they wanted that are a lot more favorable to the players.

And the fact that the WNBA negotiated such a historical deal means that they understand it too. They understand they have to be on this side of history to move our game forward.

Q. I had a question for Coach but I know it's still student-athlete portion so I'm going to have the athletes and hopefully ask my question of coach when she's talking. Tessa and Raven, what stood out to you both about maybe watching Southern, if you watched the game last night or seen film on Southern now that you know that's your next opponent?

TESSA JOHNSON: I would probably say their aggressiveness. They looked ready to play yesterday and we're just going to have to scout that and adjust.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, what she said. Can't really take no team for granted in March. I think we just need to stick to our good habits and do what we do.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions now for Coach Staley.

Q. Good morning, Coach. Over your career, you have been intentional about scheduling and supporting HBCU programs. From your perception, how has the perception of HBCU women's basketball changed over time and what still needs to happen for the respect to fully match the talent and impact those programs have?

DAWN STALEY: I think women's basketball has been in the position where it is getting better and better on all levels. HBCUs have been given sometimes a raw deal because they're just HBCUs and they're not power fours. Probably a little less than mid-majors as well, but as you're seeing, they're super well-coached.

Southern is super well-coached. They really understand what they're doing. They play a battle tested schedule. They beat a couple of power four teams. It is going to take games like that where you have to have eye-opening wins.

Similar to the path that South Carolina took. For us, you need to play marquee games and win marquee games. I think that must happen. I do think the more success HBCUs have in a tournament, they will no longer be looked at as playing games and 16 seeds and when you start to

see that happen on a more regular basis, then you know that they're taken a little more seriously and know that they are coached extremely well.

I think they are just circumstances have it to where they have to go out and play these money games, the guarantee games that are no longer guarantees, and they have to win them. And then they have to do what they did yesterday, which is be beat a good Samford team like Southern did and continue to do that. I do think the committee does look at how well you do in tournaments. They're moved by that.

Q. Coach, after the game last night, it made the rounds on social media the gifts you gave to Southern. Your thoughts on that. It's not the first time you have done something like that. How did that come about?

DAWN STALEY: It was just a small gift. I went and talked to them. I think it was on Wednesday over at the hotel and a couple of them just said you smell good, what are you wearing? A couple of them. I told them what I was wearing and then when I got home, my friend who works at the Louis store sent me samples of what I wear and I was like let me just give them to them. I just had enough of them to give to the entire team.

That was it. It was just a small gesture. I had them, I probably wouldn't use them and they could utilize them and I just did it.

Q. What was your message?

DAWN STALEY: Same. I talked to Samford as well. My message is bring your practice habits to the game. They deserve to be in the NCAA Tournament. They played well enough to be here. It's fortunate and unfortunate that somebody's going to take a loss and fortunate that someone is going to win. I think the most important thing is just to enjoy the experience of playing in the tournament. A lot of teams aren't in their position.

I told them to treat people kind. Listen to their coaches. All the things that I try to tell young people because when you get a little bit older, you have an understanding of the things that have made you successful. A lot of times it's not the games. It's things that people see publicly, the gapes, but it's the things that you do outside of the public's eye is really what is important. Just human kindness.

Q. I was asking Raven and Tessa, once you get to a final four, you want to be back at the Final Four. I'm sure you remember Virginia, how that was. Are there things you can do as an advantage to kind of make sure your teammates who have never experienced that

before understand that that's the goal, that's what we're trying to do?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, it's a lot of communication. It's a lot of just holding people accountable. It's a lot of imparting your not only of how hard it is, the challenges. How you can't get too high with the highs or too low with the lows. You have to maintain. We're really harping on doing what you do best.

This season, the regular season, it's gone, right? You look back on that season and say these are the things I do well. Let me stay within those parameters and not change and not try to do anything new because this part of the season is new. But you want to stick with the knowns at this point. The unknowns are what they are and you leave them as far away as possible.

I learned that from Coach Chaney. He used to say you look down there. If the coach still has his starters in and you're up, leave your starters in. You don't want to change. I probably don't take that page out of his book when we have the game in hand, but I have taken the stick with the knowns. When you try to change too much, when you try to -- sometimes we're a victim of watching too much film and trying to make too many changes and we just have to stick to the things that have gotten us here. That's enough, hopefully. And then if you need to tweak something here or there, you do that, but you do that at a minimum.

Q. The health of the team, how are Adhel and Maddy for tomorrow?

DAWN STALEY: Adhel still walking around in her boot. Maddy is still a little bit under the weather, but hopefully another day's rest, hopefully she'll be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. And then with Ali as the newest member of the team, how have you seen her adjust and the whirlwind of her getting over here and having to learn the plays? How has she learned to adjust and how can she help you in this tournament?

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, Ali is on an upward trajectory. It's taken the normal time. I actually think she's a little bit further along than we thought she would. Some of that is just throwing her out there. Some of that is just holding her out to see, to not put her in a situation where you're hurting her confidence. But I think she's a pretty confident young lady although she's, as I say, a whole lot. You can see it in her play. She's unbothered out there. I think she's self-assured.

I think she just needed more and more experience and I do think just playing in the SEC Tournament really probably helped her confidence. It helped us trust her a little bit more to be out there, especially when the games are super, super physical.

She got one of the most physical teams in the country. She played well against Texas and now I just think the sky is the limit as to what she can do.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Tournament Tessa and she told me last year she didn't like it because it sort of suggest she was inconsistent during the regular season. So do you think she's been "Tournament Tessa" all season? Do you think she's done enough to shed maybe the level of being a tournament only player?

DAWN STALEY: No. I think Tessa just overanalyzes things at times and that's one of them. I think it's a term of endearment that she needs to embrace a little bit more because not very many players can ruse to the challenge of post-season play and we know Tessa can do that. She has played a lot more consistently than she had the first two years.

I think that has to do with just the amount of experience she has and the amount of playing time that she's getting. I do think it's due to the work that she's put in. She's put in -- she's a lot more -- she's stronger this year than she was at the end of last year and she was intentional about working with Molly and doing the things that she needs to do to not get beat down because it's a long season. It's very physical.

If you can remember last year, she was very thin. Very thin. I do think she falls on the floor a lot more than I would like, but imagine if she didn't have -- I don't want to say this word because she might just go off the deep end again with overanalyzing but she's got a little more girth to her than she did last year. I think she's gotten a little more healthy over the past ten days. I do think we'll see, hopefully and prayerfully we'll see Tournament Tessa.

Q. I just had two quick followup questions about the perfume that you gave the girls. I was just wondering if you knew what the name of the perfume was? And then also did you give it to them yourself or was it given to, like, an assistant coach or something?

DAWN STALEY: The name of the perfume is Louis. It's Imagination. I was watching the game and then we came by their locker room and I didn't want to go into their locker room so I saw one of the young ladies that I saw when I went over to the hotel the other day and said these are for

the players. So I gave it to a staff member.

THE MODERATOR: Anything else for Coach? All right, thank you.

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