

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Southern California vs South Carolina

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Columbia, South Carolina, USA

Colonial Life Arena

## South Carolina Gamecocks

## Raven Johnson

## Agot Makeer

## Dawn Staley

### Media Conference



AGOT MAKEER: I think her versatility. She's really good. She can score at every single level, and she can pass and get others involved. So I think just shutting her down and making others do the work, I think is important.

**Q. For both of you and maybe more so Raven in this case, when Chloe gets hurt back in October, that's kind of a blow, and you guys have to absorb it and adjust. It seemed like you did. Everybody focused on new roles, what had to be done, and here you are on the verge of another Sweet 16. How did you kind of overcome her absence and just get back on the road to doing what -- reaching your goals?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Like I was saying, in the last presser, we had a huddle. The first practice we held each other's hands, and Coach said don't let anyone in our circle. She said something like you never know what might happen, but if someone goes down, it's next man up. We need to trust our teammates and rely on each other.

But Chloe might not be on the court, but she's still here. She uses her voice. She uses her leadership. She knows the game. Like she's been in this position before. So she still talks to people like this is their first time ever being in this predicament. So she may not be on the court, but she's still here.

**Q. Raven, when Gotti and I were talking in Greenville, she said she wants to guard the best player on the court. As the defensive player that you are, how proud are you to see a young guard so willing to defend, and kind of what makes Gotti so hard to play against?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: That's crazy because someone asked me about the Seat Belt Gang or whatever, and I said Gotti, giving it to her. I think Gotti's ability to do what she do, it's elite. I don't think she knows who she is and what she can do for this team. I feel like she's a silent killer.

Her defensive tenacity is phenomenal. She's long. She reminds me of DeWanna Bonner a little bit. She's hungry for the ball. She knows the reads. Honestly, she's a defensive stopper. That's the word, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the South Carolina Gamecocks, represented today by head coach Dawn Staley and student-athletes Raven Johnson and Agot Makeer.

DAWN STALEY: We're excited to participate in the second round of the NCAA Tournament. Though we had some great teams in here, a great, competitive game between Clemson and USC. It was definitely exciting, and we look forward to playing USC.

**Q. Raven, I know you've been fielding questions all weekend about this being your last game in CLA, but now that tomorrow no matter what, you're seven away from 1,000. What are your emotions going into tomorrow night?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: To win. I'm not really thinking about 1,000 whatever crap that is. I'm really just thinking about winning and advancing to the next round.

**Q. For both of you, what makes Jazzy Davidson so good? Obviously this was a November matchup, but just kind of what are you expecting to see out of her tomorrow when she has more games under her belt?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I think she's doing a really good job with the team she's on and her role. As a freshman, she has a lot that she's taken on, and I think she's doing that to the best of her ability.

I think we're going to go with our game plan and do what we do.



**Q. Both players, you've obviously played USC before. It was a long time ago. It was November. How, looking at tape, have you seen them change and evolve over the last few months?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I feel like when you have games under your belt, you start building chemistry. I think we played them, what, first, third -- third game? Yeah, third game. Everybody's trying to find a rhythm. Everybody's trying to find -- you've got new players on your team. Like Jazzy, she's a freshman. They're trying to see what she can do.

You get more games under your belt, you start building more chemistry, you start trusting each other. But I think in March, it don't even matter. It don't matter what conference we're in. It don't matter we're in the SEC. It really don't matter. It's just we need to go out there and win. Like Coach was saying today in practice, find a way to win.

AGOT MAKEER: I think they're more comfortable finding their identity. They know who they want the ball in the hands of, so I think yeah.

**Q. Overall how has Maryam helped you individually? She's a very vocal person, both on and off the court, and she talked a lot about having absolutely no regrets about coming here. Regardless of what happens, she's really happy about that decision. Just how has she helped you as individuals?**

AGOT MAKEER: I think she's really positive, and that's helped me a lot. I think I get frustrated and flustered a little bit. I play with her a lot, especially in practice, so I think just having her positive voice has helped me a lot.

RAVEN JOHNSON: Maryam is like good juju. Everything about her, it's positive. She's the person you need on your team. She's the person that she may not get the praise and glory that she wants, but we need people like that on our team who's always willing to do whatever. She may give her last anything up for somebody. I think that actually helps this team.

I think with Maryam being who she is, we need that.

**Q. A little off topic, a couple days ago Lauren Betts published a pretty personal piece about her mental health and name dropped you saying she doesn't think a lot of people know how helpful you were to her and her mom. Can you describe the relationship that you have with her and sort of the pride you have in a player that's so willing to be public about something that can**

**help others?**

DAWN STALEY: We recruited Lauren Betts, so there was a relationship there. When I saw she was going to take some time away from -- was it Stanford? Was it UCLA?

**Q. (No microphone)?**

DAWN STALEY: Right, yeah. I just heard about it. Her number's still in my phone. So I just reached out. I know when you're in a dark place -- and I kind of mentioned this yesterday -- you have to understand and combat whatever that -- whatever the evils of a dark place gives you, it overpowers you. So I think you have to overpower with the opposite end of the spectrum, just pour into positivity, pour into just her getting on the other side of it.

I think sometimes we're in the middle of it and we can't see our way out of it. Sometimes it just takes positive forces to help that. I just wanted to be one of the people that reached out and hopefully help her get to the other side.

She responded, which was pretty cool. I wasn't really expecting a response, but she responded. That was the extent of it is trying to help a young person find their way. Fortunately for us, she's able to tell her story. I know telling her story will help some other young people, some other people who are dealing with some dark places.

**Q. Coach, I want to ask you about you hiring Coach Wendale in the off-season last year and how he was on your short list. Then a follow-up question I would like to ask is how critical has he been going into this game having a lot of knowledge and experience with the USC staff, knowing that it will help your game plan tomorrow?**

DAWN STALEY: Yes, he was on the short list. He was our target person to replace Winston. I didn't know a whole lot about him. I saw him. We used to talk a little bit on the recruiting trail, but nothing like -- nothing like I thought he would be someone that we would work with in the future.

Then when you're -- when Winston did such a great job, and Winston did a great job for us, we wanted somebody that was really similar that loves basketball, that is all for the grind, that will do anything to help our team and our program continue to have the type of success that we want to have.

His name came up, and I reached out. We had a conversation. We went back and forth a little bit. I just needed him to get to campus. I think they were in the middle of the NCAA Tournament, and I just really needed him to get to campus, just commit to the campus visit

because I think, once you come here, it's a little bit different. You feel a little bit different. He's a West Coast guy.

Part of me didn't think we would get him because he's such a West Coast guy. Then the other part is, if we got him to campus, if he could be around our staff, if he could workout one of our players, if our players could meet him and all those things happened, I think it just lined up.

I thought we put him in a position to, I think, advance his career, like just from -- not even -- just from a different -- like diversify. Don't just be a West Coast guy. I know he did a stint at Vanderbilt, some other places, but I think coming to South Carolina will give him a little bit of a different resume booster when it's time for him to move 12 inches over.

He's been great. Obviously he's known those players, he recruited the players there, and he knows their system extremely well. A lot of times coaches don't want the scout of the team that they came from, and he relished in the fact that he wanted it. He wanted us to just be ahead of it.

I don't even think he really knew that -- he probably did know that they were on the schedule as well, but it's really cool to have someone that was in the room with them last year, that knows about the highs and the lows and creating an edge for us to win the game.

**Q. Does he have the scout?**

DAWN STALEY: He does.

**Q. Joyce's NCAA Tournament last year is three good games and three maybe not so great games. Has she talked about the three not so great games going into this year? Is that something you brought up to her?**

DAWN STALEY: No, we haven't really talked about it. I think Joyce does a really good job of internalizing and watching. I'm sure she watched it the three games she didn't play well over and over again just to learn from them.

Obviously we know, but she's been pretty consistent all year long. There's been some dips here and there, but for the most part, I think Joyce has an understanding of what needs to get done and what her job is for our team to do.

She's one that will right the wrong, will correct the mistakes she thought she contributed to of her having a subpar Joyce performance.

**Q. Chloe gets hurt in October. It's a blow. People have to adjust. You always hear coaches say next**

**person up. That's hard for young people to necessarily get that message. Did some of your older players kind of tell everybody, hey, we've got to adjust? Did you do that? Was Chloe involved in maybe helping them adjust to new roles?**

DAWN STALEY: No, I think Chloe was in a bad space obviously. I think it's our job as coaches to hit it once and move on, like she's not going to be with the team. She's not going to play. Next woman up.

Then you don't visit. You don't revisit. You don't talk about what you don't have, what you could have had. We just didn't talk about it. We still don't talk about what her contributions would have been for our team. Could she have made us better? Yes. You lose experience like that, you lose such a tenacious player like on both sides of the basketball, yes, she would have made us a lot better.

But young people also are resilient. They find a way. If we don't harp on it, they're not going to harp on it. They're just going to keep playing the way that we prepped to play.

**Q. Coach, there was a rule change this season about challenging plays. I wanted to talk about how Hudson Jacobs' role for you -- I know he's a video guy -- and how his role has changed for you over the years, I know he's been with you a long time. Also talk about how he's developed over time here and how you've seen other departments and other programs change with this rule change this year?**

DAWN STALEY: With the rule change, your video coordinator's responsibilities, it antes up. They've upped the ante when it comes to how much we lean on them.

Hudson's been probably the secret to our success for a very long time. When I tell you that, it is all the people that don't get the notoriety. To have to really -- and it's not like -- when he's working with different coaches on scouts, they all have their own way of doing it. Although we work on the same program from the same program, it's a lot of different ways that they like to compile information in games and how they like it cut up.

For him, he has the patience of Jobe when it comes to dealing with all of us. But he understands it, he knows it. He's always getting better. I mean, and he's efficient with it as well. There are decisions we have to make because -- we have to be fiscally responsible when it comes to things that we bring into our program, and the stuff out there is so expensive that Hudson really dives in to make sure that we're getting our money's worth or probably getting more than our money's worth.

So it's that. He helps us make big time decisions on just being fiscally responsible because there are a lot of things out there that could really help you. From an analytical standpoint, he's always been cutting edge and trying to get us to just understand the numbers without overpowering us with them.

Bottom line, you've got to win the game. You've got to win the game. The players have to play, yes. Do they put you in positions to maybe decrease the amount of things that you do that will put you in a better -- yes, he gives us those things. So vital, vital, vital piece to our success.

**Q. How is Maddy McDaniel? Do you think she'll play tomorrow? And is Ali Tournebize okay? I didn't see her in the locker room back there?**

DAWN STALEY: Mouse practiced a little bit today. We'll see how she feels in the morning. I know she wants to go. And then Ali is good to go.

**Q. Were you out courtside for the end of regulation in that Clemson-USC game?**

DAWN STALEY: I was.

**Q. I don't know, is it good to know that officials have the equipment now and the ability to make the right call in situations like that? Five years ago that happens, they get together, maybe coin flip, Clemson wins the game, and everybody goes home.**

DAWN STALEY: It's great. I think the officials want to get it right. I think any game, any sport, they want to get it right. I thought it was good. Before, I was sitting with my iPad, and I started rewinding, and I'm like, no, it is not good, right?

It is that judgment call that they have to make throughout. There are plays where there isn't a replay that they actually have to -- actually, 95 percent of the game is that type of thing where they are relying on their expertise and their experience and being in that situation.

But for end of game situations, of course. Where the game is decided by what you call, you can go back and see it and correct it, yes, I think it's a powerful tool.

**Q. How much are you relying on Hudson Jacobs in moments like those, or just any challenging moment? Particularly when you're in that situation, how much are you relying on him?**

DAWN STALEY: Every single challenge, we rely on Hudson to make the call. If he feels good about it, he's

going to say yes. If he doesn't, he's going to say no. If he's in the middle, he's going to say he's in the middle. A lot of times, that is a no.

We're only doing -- absolutely, I think we lost one, I believe. This year we lost one. But we'll never -- I'm not one to use a whole lot of timeouts. So if we lose one here or there, I don't think it hurts us as much. So I'm always thinking about that. I'll use one more so in the first half than I will in the second half.

**Q. I have a bigger picture question for you. One of the things about March Madness is the mid-major team that kind of comes out of nowhere. If you're looking at the brackets this year of the teams that have advanced even to the round of 32, I don't know that there's a mid-major left. Everything is a Power 4 type conference or bigger school. Is Cinderella dead? Is it good for the game? Is it bad for the game?**

DAWN STALEY: I'm going to say this because we got a No. 1 seed. I hope it holds true for at least this No. 1 seed to make it all the way to the Final Four.

No, I think -- definitely not in the men's game this year. I think the men's game has been very, very competitive. Our game has been mainly the top seeds advance.

It's tough. It's tough. I think the Power 4 conferences, we've seen so much. Like we've seen so much, the levels of basketball, to where the mid-major style of play, they don't affect us as much as it used to affect us where you get a team that used to play five out and they're running around, like we've seen that. We have that in our nonconference.

We specifically -- not just we, I'm talking about Power 4s. We go out and play those types of teams in the nonconference so we gain some familiarity. So when it's time for tournament time, we have that, and nothing will really catch us off guard. So I don't think the Cinderella thing is dead. I think it's probably a little bit dormant. I'll say that for right now just in case we run up against someone that we didn't expect.

**Q. Tessa has such a quick release on the ball. Is that something you saw when she was in high school, that release? And is there anybody she reminds you of that you either coached or just watched and admired the way she releases the ball?**

DAWN STALEY: Really quick release. Tessa, believe it or not, was a point guard when I first saw her on the recruiting trail and then in high school, point guard.

So, yes, it's natural. I would say it's natural. It probably hasn't always been natural. Her dad did a really great job of coaching her up and putting her in this situation and allowing her to -- allowing her game to be as attractive as it is not only to collegians, but I know, I sat with a couple of WNBA coaches, and she's on their radar.

What was the second part?

**Q. Anybody she reminds you of? It's pretty quick.**

DAWN STALEY: It is, it's quick. I mean, Diana Taurasi gets it off pretty quick, pretty quick. I'll just say that's probably the only comparison I would say to their games is the amount of time that they have the ball in their hands before they shoot it.

**Q. The other thing I wanted to ask about is social media these days. How do you help the players kind of navigate that? I know you're always on social media, you're always on your phone. So maybe you're really good at knowing what to do on that.**

DAWN STALEY: I think it's gotten a little bit better for our team. I think because of how much money they make in NIL. So they're really cautious about what they post, which is pretty good. I think a lot of times they have agents that are really watching over and actually directing them as to what's good, what you need to stay away from.

So there's a lot of education around it because you have to protect your ability to make money in this space.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports