

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - College of Charleston vs Duke

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Durham, North Carolina, USA

Cameron Indoor Stadium

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Coach Kara Lawson**

**Taina Mair**

**Toby Fournier**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the Duke Blue Devils. We have with us student-athletes Taina Mair and Toby Fournier. They are open to questions from the room as well as Zoom.

**Q. Toby, third team All-American. What does that honor mean? And then going into this tournament, how do you process this as heard other teams talk about a two-game tournament, and then you worry about the next tournament when you get there. How do you guys sort of look at this?**

TOBY FOURNIER: For us, it's always just focusing on the game ahead of us. That's the most important. We're focused on Charleston, and we're ready to play them.

As for the All-American award, I'm really happy with it. I'm very grateful, and I also couldn't have done it without my teammates beside me. They're the ones that feed me the passes most of the time. Especially Taina, right beside me, it's kind of perfect timing for that.

Super grateful, and I'm excited to play.

**Q. For both players, obviously, the season started off rough. You're playing your best basketball now. It's very much a journey. When you look at this tournament, are you kind of approaching it like knowing that you guys have already been through the gauntlet. You did so much to get to where you are now? Did that prepare you well for this kind of test you're entering now?**

TOBY FOURNIER: I think Coach Kara was very strategic



in the nonconference schedule she gave us. She wanted to test us early so we were able to take all of that and apply it to the games that really mattered at the end of the year, especially in March, especially during the ACC Championship. That was strategic and helped us throughout the year. We've faced a lot of adversity, and we're ready to go through the highs and lows of the game.

TAINA MAIR: It feels good to know that we went through that adversity in the beginning, rather than being punched in the mouth now. It feels good to also peak in March. I think that's what Coach Kara wanted us to do.

We didn't start as we wanted. As we got through the season, we started getting better and better and better. I feel like we're playing our best basketball now. That's exactly what Coach wanted. It feels good as a team, and we feel very confident going into the tournament.

**Q. For either player, how much does the winning culture at the campus sort of feed into what you've been able to do? There's a lot of talk about the alignment of football and men's basketball, women's basketball and what your the athletic director has been able to do. How much has that fed into the expectation of success?**

TAINA MAIR: Just being at Duke, it's a culture of winning but also a culture of working hard behind closed doors that winning illuminates. I think for us, just being a part of this atmosphere and being a part of this journey, along with other sports, it means something to the community. But also as a university, we're making a staple out of Duke right now, and it's amazing that we're part of this history.

TOBY FOURNIER: I would say the same thing that T said. A big thing for us is hard work and seeing all the other teams be successful holds us up to a certain standard. I think that standard has always been here at Duke, especially on the football side, the men's basketball side, and now we've also had our history with the women's basketball as well. We're a new generation, especially with Coach Kara. So we're excited to be part of that winning culture.



THE MODERATOR: Thank you both for being here.

TAINA MAIR: Thank you.

TOBY FOURNIER: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Good luck tomorrow.

We're now joined by the head coach of the Duke blue Devils Kara Lawson. We'll have comments by coach and then questions.

Coach, the floor is yours.

KARA LAWSON: Excited for the tournament to start. It's obviously been a long time for a lot of teams to have a couple weeks off. I think it was good for us to be able to take a break. Now, since the bracket has come out, to be able to have an opponent in front of us so that we know how we can prepare, and we know the path that's in front of us, which is our first round game against Charleston. A very good team, and we're excited to face them.

**Q. Coach, first, I've got to ask about the dog. How did you guys get it? Is that your idea? You have a different dog each semester?**

KARA LAWSON: Yes. We have a puppy kindergarten here at Duke, and it's the K-9 Cognition Center, and they have many puppies that are here. They're training to be service dogs, and they're a part of our campus community. They live with students in the dorms.

We are part of that learning program every semester with one of the puppies. There's many puppies in the kindergarten. So our puppy this semester is named Rina. This is actually her last day today so it's kind of like she graduated to the press conference. We thought she grew up enough, and she made it past the first question so I guess that's good.

But it's something that Rina has come to our -- she comes to our practices a couple times a week and spends time in the office and, obviously, the players all love her.

**Q. I'm assuming your team gets something out of that?**

KARA LAWSON: I mean, I think probably puppies and babies and, I don't know, maybe candy are the three things they get most excited about. Whenever she comes in, they get very excited to see her, screaming her name and talking to her. She's also grown a lot. She can sit in practice and watch, and she knows for the most part she can't run on the court.

She has an understanding of when she's allowed to play and when it's time to watch. She's learned that over the course of this semester by just being around us. So she very much looks forward to the end of practice. Once we circle up and huddle up, then she kind of knows that this is her time, that she can play.

**Q. Coach, as observers and fans, I think we all feel kind of the extra energy and just passion that March Madness brings. As a coach with your players, that sort of energy, do you guys feel that in the locker room as well? How do you use that energy in a positive way on the court?**

KARA LAWSON: There's definitely excitement overall for the postseason and for the NCAA Tournament in particular. There's no doubt you feel it as a coach, you feel it as a player. You feel it as a fan.

We feel it as fans too. We're fans of, obviously, our men's team and getting a chance to watch them today and root them on. So even though we're in it, we're also fans of the other tournament and wanting our men's team to do well.

**Q. You described the NCAA Tournament earlier this week of being a tournament of champions and a tough, difficult journey to get through it. Your players earlier were saying they felt the adversity of the rough start this year has prepared them well for the tournament and some of it was intentional on your part, the nonconference schedule being difficult. Can you address that? Do you feel like you're well prepared for the tournament because of the gauntlet your team has gone through this season and did you think of that when you had the early season games?**

KARA LAWSON: We always try to schedule really tough in the nonconference. It's the only portion of your schedule you control. Obviously, conference play is whosoever there, and they choose that.

Since I've been here, we've had one of the top strength of schedules every year. This year is no different than what we normally do. And, yes, I think it's intentional to reveal our weaknesses as a team. It's not intentional to lose games, but it's intentional to play hard teams.

Then you figure out what you need to work on really quickly. Sometimes if you think about it -- I don't know if you're this way, but I've been this way all my life. We want to, like, delay revealing weaknesses about ourselves so we kind of hide them because we don't want people to know what they are. I think that's human nature.

That's actually the worst thing to do because if they're never revealed, then you don't have the same urgency to strengthen them because you're hiding them. So if no one knows that they're there, then why do you have to fix them?

So I'm always trying to find out what are the processes that will get us growth the fastest. How do you grow the fastest? I want to grow faster than people. Well, one of those is reveal it early, like right away. If you think about if you would reveal more weaknesses in who you are as a person, who you are as a player earlier in your life, then you'd have fixed them earlier instead of just waited.

And the waiting never helps you. It keeps you stagnant because you don't grow. You're just waiting for it to almost be revealed. And then it's revealed, and then you fix it. It is uncomfortable to do that, though. It's uncomfortable to live that way because you have to be okay with them being revealed.

Ours were revealed on national television, right, in front of people. So that's, I think, part of the courage that goes into being a player that's on a platform like this is when you make mistakes, everybody sees them, but that's a part of playing big-time college basketball. They understand that.

So we've had them revealed, some of them over and over. We fixed most of them. It's not like we're a perfect team, but I do think having that happen to us early bonded us, connected us, and I think we became very resolute in understanding what we needed to fix.

**Q. Kara, I want to know what it's been like to watch Delaney's growth not only this year but the last couple of years.**

KARA LAWSON: Delaney is -- as steady as it looks like she plays, that's how she works. Like clockwork, I don't know the time, but there's a specific time, I would say maybe 5:30, 5 p.m. If you come here at 5:30 in the evening, you'll see Delaney shooting every day for three years. Every day. Every single day.

I don't even check anymore. I never even checked. I would just like happen to be walking through there. I'm not a checker like that on them. You can't miss her. And her understanding of our schemes, of our concepts, how she studies to be prepared, knowing our plays, knowing our schemes, all of those things just add up, add up, add up. So it maybe feels like, oh, wow, she's gotten so much better. But she's just done it every week, every month, every year.

And then you get to this point where she's a really good

player, and she can score. She can rebound. She can defend. She's become more versatile as a defender. She's tough. She's unafraid of big moments. She's always played well in big games from her freshman year. From her freshman year, we played a game, and Delaney would play well. That's just how it's always been.

So I have a lot of confidence in her, and she's very consistent for us. It's a great feeling to have as a coach, to have a player that you know you can depend on that's going to be consistent.

**Q. Coach, we've talked to Manny and we've talked to John. They keep mentioning alignment between the president, the athletic director, the coaches. I wonder what kind of alignment means to you and how being part of a broader athletic department's success has kind of helped what you guys are trying to do as well.**

KARA LAWSON: Well, when I came here to Duke, obviously, Nina was the deputy AD at the time, but she was the one that ran the hiring process that I interviewed and I spent most of the time talking to. It was a very easy rapport with Nina from the beginning, from the first conversation.

Your relationship with your athletic director and your president is amongst the most important relationship that you have when you're a coach at an institution. Meeting Nina for the first time, I felt really good, even though she wasn't the AD at the time. I felt really good about the type of person she was, her integrity, and her communication. All of those things were really high level.

Then getting a chance to meet President Price and visit with him, I felt the same way. And it was different coaches in football and basketball when I came here. Obviously, Coach K and Coach Cut. But as time went on and Manny and John -- John first. I think John was hired and Manny hired. Being around them day to day, observing their teams, being in meetings with them, similar, right?

Honesty, integrity, attention to detail. A lot of the similarities in what's important to us.

So I think, like anything, whether it's your family or it's at your church or it's at your job, when you are about a lot of the same foundational principles, then you're going to be -- that's the alignment, right? That's that word. You're going to have a lot in common and be able to have a great connection.

**Q. Anybody that watches your team play knows that Ashlon Jackson smiles a lot. I just asked her about that in the locker room. When did you realize that that**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

**doesn't mean she's not competitive, that that's just who she is and sort of the energy that she puts out?**

KARA LAWSON: Probably her freshman year, I realized it pretty early because she was smiling in things she shouldn't be smiling in. Like I would be yelling at her and in close proximity, and she would still smile. Or we'd be running a hard sprint, a conditioning test, and she would be smiling. So what a weirdo, you know? But that's how she was.

And then I actually called her mom and dad about it not because she was in trouble. I just wanted to make sure that that was normal. And they said the same thing. That when she was young, she was just smiling all the time, and her dad was like, I thought something was wrong with her, you know, like it was the same thing.

So then once you kind of put all the pieces together, you're like that's just her. Everyone knows that's just her. I don't think I've brought it up since her freshman year, but everybody that doesn't know her well brings it up because it is noticeable.

But with all that said, she is a naturally happy person. She, for four years, has come into practice in a good mood, and I'm not making that up. Almost every day, she comes in a good mood. If she's not in a good mood, she gets herself to where she can play and have joy. She doesn't bring everybody else down if she's coming into practice because something's bothering her.

That's not to say there's never been tears and she hasn't had tough times. That happens. But that's such a great quality in someone that you work with every day, that they come in with this energy and this positivity and this joy because when you're with each other every day, it can get long, you know what I mean? It can be draining emotionally.

She's one of those that keeps the level here from an emotional standpoint, and it's great to have.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time. Good luck tomorrow.

KARA LAWSON: Thank you.

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