

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Semifinal - North Carolina vs Duke

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Kara Lawson**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



**Tuesday. How are you and your staff kind of balancing portal recruiting with game prep?**

KARA LAWSON: I haven't done anything at the portal. I'm sure my assistants are doing that, but as far as me personally, I haven't. I haven't done anything. I've just been focused on the game.

**Q. Coach, can you talk about, you know the Tar Heels very, very well and vice versa. Can you talk about what it's going to be like to play them for the third time, and what do you think may be different from the first two times you played them this season?**

KARA LAWSON: I mean, the main difference is Kelly and Ustby will play. They didn't play in the second meeting. I think that's probably the biggest difference. We've played them three times in a season before, I think maybe two years ago. It's not uncommon to have that for teams over the years.

I don't know. It feels like it's a really big deal for the guys that we're playing them three times. It's not something we've really talked about or worried about.

There's a familiarity, obviously, from a scout standpoint, from a personnel standpoint. You know the players. I think the games have -- well, you know, my first year, we were terrible. We got our butt kicked both times by everybody in the league. Got our butt kicked by everybody in the league. Since that first year, I think the games have been really competitive when you look at the margins of the games and how good both teams have been. So that would be my expectation again tomorrow.

**Q. If you remember back to your playing days at Tennessee when you got to the Sweet 16, which was, I think, every year, what were things that the coach would tell you as a team to get ready for a game like this, to get to the Elite Eight, to get to the Final Four, if you remember?**

KARA LAWSON: I don't know that I remember about this round specifically. Yeah, I mean, it's so different now. So much more depth in the game now, I think. Back then,

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Obviously, this is y'all's third meeting with UNC this season, but it's the first meeting in the NCAA Tournament. Just talk about how big is it to see these two programs come together here in the Sweet 16 for the first time.**

KARA LAWSON: We haven't really talked about that with our team in terms of a first meeting or anything. I didn't know that until you said that. We're fighting for a spot in the Elite Eight, and so whoever the opponent is, is the opponent.

At this time of year and I think with conferences getting bigger, I mean, we have 18 teams in our conference. I think over time, you're going to see meetings earlier and earlier in the tournament. It's just going to be a fact of kind of where we are. In college, I think there's another one here on Saturday, right? Tennessee plays Texas in the conference in the Sweet 16. I think Tennessee men and Kentucky men play tonight in the Sweet 16.

I'm not really, like, moved either way by it. It's not just another game. It's an important game. It's a game to get a step beyond where we were able to reach a year ago, and it's a game to put yourself in position to play for a spot in the Final Four. That's kind of how we've approached it, and trying to honor the value of the game with the right amount of respect and the right amount of preparation.

**Q. Two questions. One, just a status update on Toby?**

KARA LAWSON: Toby will play tomorrow.

**Q. Second, obviously the transfer portal opened up on**



there wasn't as much depth throughout the tournament.

I'm not trying to avoid your question. I can't remember about what she said before the Sweet 16.

**Q. I'm curious, how much the growth of Oluchi has helped you guys from year one to year two for you now? Just your thoughts on the way she's grown her brand and the fashion aspect, her personal brand?**

KARA LAWSON: I think Oluchi has grown a lot from her freshman to her sophomore year. She has a better understanding of what we're trying to do on the court, understanding of the scheme, and also able to slow down a little bit, which I know it doesn't look like she ever slows down, but she's able to make more reads now. Whereas, I felt like her freshman year, she was just playing fast, faster than everybody all the time. That works to a certain point, but then you have to slow down and see what the defense is trying to do and make adjustments.

She's a very hard worker. Every day, she comes in with the right level of focus and the right level of effort. That might seem like an, oh, yeah, okay, everybody does that. Everybody does not do that. If you can get yourself to be a player that does that, you can set yourself apart.

I mean, I don't know how in depth you want me -- I can get into the fashion. It's not really my forte, believe it or not. But, you know, Oluchi has a great passion about it. As a coach, you just try to encourage your players to follow that, follow their passions, the thing that they spend a lot of time on. Basketball doesn't have to take up their whole life. It's healthy, and I think there's room for other things to pursue. We're fortunate, our creative team was able to kind of build that series with her and to be able to showcase the passion. And so, they work with all of our players in that way to just amplify the things that they're interested in.

She's got a lot of charisma, so she's very well-spoken and has a great personality. I think all of that combines to something that she should be able to carve out a little bit of a niche for herself.

**Q. Kara, Alyssa Ustby didn't play in the last game for Carolina, the last time y'all faced them, but she's somebody who you have sort of had to prepare for every time faced Carolina in your five years. What kind of challenge does they present for y'all on both ends of the floor?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, good player, very productive over her time, scores it well, rebounds it well, makes really good hustle plays. Then, obviously, being a fifth year senior, the experience, you know, that she has and that Gakdeng has

on the front court. If you are looking at the roster, that's probably the experience differential. They're very experienced in the front court, and we're all freshmen and sophomores in the front court. That's a challenge physically that we'll have to meet. We're capable of meeting it. Obviously, we've been freshmen, sophomores all year. We didn't just become that right now. We'll have to definitely meet that challenge.

So, yeah, been productive for a long time in this league, and she'll definitely make an impact on the game. It's not -- the way she plays, you can't take her out of the game, if that makes sense. She impacts the game in a lot of areas.

**Q. I think earlier you mentioned that that second game against UNC, Kelly and Ustby didn't play. I'm curious how differently you watched that film than the first game when they're obviously a different team. Is there a difference in how you watch that film in preparation of this game?**

KARA LAWSON: I mean, sure. Certain personnel have certain tendencies, so they might be running the same actions, but a tendency with a player with one guard might be different in how they run the action than the other. So the good thing is, you obviously have film on them since that game, since they've been back, and certainly obviously with first and second round games this past week.

So, yeah, I don't know that you watch it differently, but you have an awareness that they're not there and there are more minutes of players that maybe won't play as many minutes this game. So understanding the rotation and all of that, so...

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