

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Semifinal - Maryland vs South Carolina

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks Dawn Staley

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. I know the transfer portal opened a couple of days ago. I'm curious, how do you and your staff go about balancing watching and recruiting out of the portal while simultaneously prepping for the Sweet 16 and beyond?

DAWN STALEY: It's part of our job. It's part of the job description. We're talking to some people that we're interested in, at least talking to their representatives. That's just part of it. If you have a need, the transfer portal is more than enough in there to find someone that can help your program, so...

Q. As women's basketball has evolved over the last year or so, how has your role evolved beyond basketball, being a face of the sport, having discussions about leadership beyond basketball with your players? How has that role evolved for you?

DAWN STALEY: I think I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm comfortable in my skin with dealing with look, sound, feel. Something looks, sounds, or feels off, then I address it. If it looks, sounds, or feels great, then I promote it.

It's what it's supposed to be. Our program has been very successful. And more times than not, the questions about the state of our game is directed towards the most successful coach. So I've been -- I don't mean to sound like I'm patting myself on the back, but it's just how it is in our sport. You just gravitate towards who has had the most success to figure out -- to get quotes about our game.

I would probably say the same thing that I say today, that I



would have said 15, 20 years ago, but, you know, we were just still trying to become a prominent program. Now that we are, we field those questions. I only want our game to grow, even if that's a detriment momentarily to our program. I'm okay with that.

Q. Kind of sticking with just the general women's basketball, as a fan, a supporter of the game, how tough or unfortunate was it to see JuJu Watkins go down for the season?

DAWN STALEY: Really tough. I mean, JuJu is loved by all of us. JuJu is raising and lifting our game up with how she plays, with cornering the market when it comes to NIL deals. I mean, she's a business herself, and to see part of that not a part of our NCAA Tournament, something is missing. There's a big void.

We were fortunate enough to be one of her schools in the end. So I've kept in touch with her, her support system. I sent her a text out. I sent her a text out the night of the injury, but it went green, so that means I don't have the right number. Her person sent me the right number last night, so I shot her a text last night.

Q. Dawn, you talked last season about the challenges coaching the team presented to you with so many youngsters. I'm wondering, as you headed into the season, whether you had a different approach with players coming back off of last year?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I think the biggest thing in winning the championship and then coming back is the players seem to forget how hard it was. We won. We were undefeated. You can kind of get drunk off that success and think, oh, we can do it again. It's much harder than they could have ever imagined. We had to work through not playing our best basketball early and not playing to the standard that we were used to. Those lessons came with a few losses this season that we needed.

Every single one of our losses came at a time when we needed it, and we came out better because of it. I hope it's enough to get us to the finish line.



Q. This is the 16th ranked team you're going to play this year. You never shy away about saying early in the year, you schedule for this time. So describe how the gauntlet of schedule, the regular season, just primes for the biggest stage in March.

DAWN STALEY: We manufacture our schedule, so in the end, like now and in March and April, we're prepped for styles of play, we're prepped for being seasoned and playing against highly competitive programs. It's what we've done. It's what we've done for probably my entire career. It's probably what we've wanted to do for my entire career. So it's not based on trying to pad wins, because we're not like that. We try to pad championships. The only way you do that is, you play a really good, competitive non-conference.

You know the SEC is going to be super competitive, so we just like to prepare for moments like the Sweet 16, and knowing it's going to be a hard-fought matchup. Hopefully, we got enough familiarity, if we're in a tight game, to finish it, to know how to finish it, and not blink, not flinch. Just finish it.

Q. General question: You guys, Texas, and LSU are all in the bottom 15% in the country in three-point attempt rate. I guess, how important do you think the 3-point shot is to modern day women's college basketball, and why are you guys able -- you guys as a trio, able to have success without taking a ton of threes?

DAWN STALEY: I will say, one, it's personnel-based. Two is if you're not going to be able to control the 3-point line, then you have to control the paint. I don't know what the numbers are as far as controlling the paint, but I'm quite sure that connects all of those programs you've just mentioned. There's a way around it.

Obviously, we got some players in that can shoot it. Probably hasn't shot it as well as we shot it last year, but when you make winning points in the paint, battle, and when you make that an emphasis, and you defend, you give yourself an opportunity to really win some tough basketball games and compete for a national championship.

Q. I'm curious, just your thoughts on the two regional system? I know, obviously, in the past you had four, but I'm curious if it changes anything for your scheduling when you have all eight teams, trying to juggle practice schedules or things of that nature, or how it impacts you guys at all?

DAWN STALEY: That's probably it. You don't get a shoot-around time at a reasonable hour. Other than that, I mean, I actually like the two regions. I like having seven other teams that's trying to advance to the Elite Eight and advance to the Final Four right in one place.

I do think it allows our fans, fans of women's basketball, to gravitate to one spot. I know the attendance will be up because of it. So bottom line, we need to drive revenue as much as possible.

Q. Just on tomorrow, you've faced Maryland the last two years, but not this year. Is this a similar Maryland team as the ones you have scouted in the past? What stands out about them as far as a matchup?

DAWN STALEY: Not similar in their personnel, but similar in how they play. I think Brenda has this team, this is how she wants to play. When you are able to play your style of play, you feel comfortable going into every basketball game. They will shoot the 3-ball. They will drive it down your throats. They have some bigs that can command the paint. They play up and down. They get up and down the floor. They want the game in the 80s and 90s and 100s if they can.

I think it's very similar in the style of play, just different people. She got some players out of the transfer portal and made herself a team. They have great chemistry. That's super cool that you can bring in as many new players and get them to gel. Super cool and happy for Brenda for that.

Q. On Selection Sunday, you had kind of mentioned potentially changing your approach to scheduling in terms of the non-conference. Now that it's a couple of weeks later, do you think in the future you'll maybe peel back with less top competition because you have played, not even just a really tough schedule, but some of the very best teams?

DAWN STALEY: Let me preface this, and I should have prefaced this a couple of weeks ago. Me speaking out about not being the No. 1 overall seed, I hope, didn't diminish what UCLA earned and deserved and accomplished. I should have led with that.

Me speaking out is more about what should happen in the future. So I'm speaking about the future and how you need to look at teams that manufacture schedules for that moment. If we're unable to get a No. 1 seed because we lost in a head-to-head, I mean, would you play that? Would you think about playing UCLA if they're going to use that against us? Would you think about, if you lose to UConn, you know, by 29 points, but you still got the No. 1,

you compete and you got the No. 1 schedule in the country, and you could never get -- you could never get it back?

I guess. We have to think about that. We still want to elevate our sport in the way that it should be and play these games.

I say that as moving forward, but the competitor in me, we're going to play the games. We are. We're going to play the games, but I do need the committee to look at it from our vantage point, which is, you're telling me we can't ever -- we lose three games. And to play the schedule that we play, we can't ever be considered for the No. 1 overall seed?

So, I mean, that's what I want them to think about. Not necessarily diminishing, you know, the overall No. 1 seed because, I mean, UCLA has had a great year. They deserve it. We deserve it.

It's a topic of conversation. Well, I think we deserve it. They got it. What I say doesn't matter because I'm not a decisionmaker, but I do need the decision makers to see another side of it.

Q. You talked earlier about, the players sometimes forget how hard it was the year after. I'm curious, now that you've done this multiple times, what have you learned about trying to make that run the next year as you get through the tournament?

DAWN STALEY: It's hard. I mean, it's hard. It's hard. Parity is alive and well in our game. I do know that you have to be disciplined. You have to create some really good championship habits in order for you to continue to get back to this place. You've got to have really good coaches that do a really good job at scouting. That's hard because there are some really good teams that can change their style of play in a matter of a second to give themselves an edge.

So, I mean, it's hard, but that's why we do it. That is the pull. That is the very thing that we gravitate towards because we know anything that's hard is going to be gratifying.

Q. A two-part question. First part is, did you watch the Maryland-Alabama game? I know you're a huge fan of the sport. It's a pretty great game to watch. So just your thoughts of watching that game as a basketball fan more than just a coach.

The other part is just a quick transfer portal question again. You've been very active in the past and very successful.

Is the timing right for it to be now? Is there a time you would say it would be better if it was after the Final Four or whenever you think would be the best time?

DAWN STALEY: Yes, I watched it. Obviously, that was our next opponent. I watched it live. I was actually cheering for the SEC because I know how hard it is in our league, and I wanted our league to be rewarded for just being the best, most competitive league. That's just the SEC in me.

But Maryland hung in there. You know, they hung in there, and they made an incredible comeback. Then you start -- then you start looking at Maryland, like, oh, they came back. Should they win it? I was looking at it from a fan and not necessarily the next opponent, which is cool. So you can compartmentalize being a fan and it being our next opponent and really appreciating.

I did text Kristy and let her know, I'm sorry you had to lose that basketball game. She worked extremely hard, and that game isn't indicative of their season. Then Barker, I mean, you've got to give it up. Like, it's hard when someone you know is just pouring her heart out onto the court, and you come up short. You want it for a player that exemplifies the competitive nature of who you are as women's basketball players, coaches, enthusiasts, participants.

Now, the transfer portal... I think the timing is all screwed up. It really plays on your ability to compartmentalize. It really plays on it. If you aren't -- I mean, most coaches are, but if you are not really good at it, it can sidetrack you. But for us, the main thing, the main thing at this point is trying to win another national championship.

The people that are in the portal, if they can't really understand that, they probably aren't ones that prioritize winning a national championship.

But you still have to do it. Yes, I'm going to call somebody when I leave here. A few people. Just because you got to let them know, hey, we're thinking about you. We got this run we're trying to... but you are a priority for us, so...

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