

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

Friday, March 28, 2025

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Kara Lawson**

**Oluchi Okanawa**

**Vanessa de Jesus**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Duke 47, North Carolina 38

**THE MODERATOR:** We are joined by Duke Head Coach Kara Lawson. We will have an opening statement from Coach.

**KARA LAWSON:** Exactly how we expected the game to go. It's how these games are. If you've watched these games over the last few years, it's competitive and really gritty and I thought both teams played with great effort.

It wasn't our best night offensively, that's for sure, but man, did we dig down deep the second and fourth quarter single digits and in the Sweet 16 that's hard to do. That's something that's been consistently who we are and we consistently play with great effort on that end of the floor. We kept ourselves in it.

I will be honest I was worried down 11-0 if we would score at all in the game but I don't think there has ever been a shutout in the tournament. So felt pretty good that we could score at some point and the two up here were huge difference makers for us. I thought Vanessa changed the game when she came in. Just her fearlessness attacking, ball screen action, getting to the rim and loosening up their defense to give us confidence and her composure running the team was huge.

Then Oluchi continues to be an exact player on both ends for us. I thought her two threes in the first half were big to give us confidence and obviously she carried the day with the rebounding, 12 boards today and we needed those.



We were getting outrebounded at the half and we kept talking at timeouts about turning the tide in our direction.

So really proud of these two. They led the way to get us to the next round.

**Q. Oluchi, an 11-0 hold in this type of game can be a pretty big one to dig out of, but you guys were able to do it. What was the refocus or the conversations and what got you guys back into the game and to go up by double digits?**

**OLUCHI OKANAWA:** Great question. I think for one we all understood we've been here before, and with our connectivity we are able to climb out of any deficit if we focus on what we need to do: A, rebounding, our defensive abilities, cracking down on the details more. So that was our focus and keep doing us, keep doing what we do and we're going to chip away.

**Q. For both of you, obviously every win is sweet but is this sweeter knowing it's against your long-time state rival?**

**VANESSA DE JESUS:** Yeah, I think for us I think what makes it even more sweet is moving forward to a game that could potentially get us to the Final Four. And we want to play whoever we have to play and at the end of the day we're just happy to get the win and keep moving forward.

**OLUCHI OKANAWA:** Of course being a part of this rivalry is great, they're such a talented team. Obviously to be able to play a great game on a big stage like this to go to the Elite Eight was awesome.

**Q. Oluchi talk about what it takes to play defense under Coach Lawson's system. Can you give us the inside view of what it's like to do what you were able to do today defensively?**

**OLUCHI OKANAWA:** For one I think maybe a misconception with defense is that there is some sort of detail, and details are a part of it but most importantly, it's your want. You either want to play defense or you don't. And playing under Coach she has done a great job of



creating that culture where we want to because it's such a big part in how we win, and really just shows with our defensive mindset it's all heart and it's all playing for one another.

**Q. I've been following you ladies pretty much most of the season. What can you say about this win over the rest of the wins?**

VANESSA DE JESUS: Yeah, I think just for us, again, it shows how much this hard work since the summer over all these days has paid off, and last year we came short in this game. So for us it was about coming back to this moment and being ready and I think we did as a whole team and I'm just really proud of our whole group.

OLUCHI OKANAWA: It's a little bit of deja vu because obviously last year we came to the Sweet 16, too, and we unfortunately fell short, we all knew we wanted to come back and get further. So it's a blessing.

**Q. Oluchi, another great game, 12 points, 12 rebounds, what were you seeing offensively and on the boards that allowed you to have success?**

OLUCHI OKANAWA: I knew we were getting outrebounded, I knew every time a shot that goes up, I need to go in. That's what my team needed from me to win.

Offensively I just kept running the floor. I just putting up the shot that I'm confident in taking and that my team and my coaches are confident in me taking.

**Q. Oluchi, you have talked about how energy kind of like is one of the main parts of your play style but today there were a lot of moments when it seemed like you were the first one up and down the court, especially when the starters got into a hole early, it seemed like when the bench got on there, the energy brought was contagious. Can you talk about how you bring energy and Vanessa talk how as the point guard, it's your job to manage the energy?**

VANESSA DE JESUS: I think for myself coming in, in the games I had a lot of ups and downs in that moment. And for me it's important to bring that composure and me being a vet and playing in these big games I think, I understand what we need to stay together and playing my role, and I just kept our composure.

OLUCHI OKANAWA: For me while I do bring energy, I am someone who feeds off my teammates, and I really fed off her today. She was incredible and seeing what she was doing really revitalized me, and it made me even more

aggressive and hungry to get done what I needed to get done.

**Q. Both of you, thinking back what was it about Coach Lawson that made each of you want to play for her and to reach the Elite Eight with her, what does that mean to you both?**

OLUCHI OKANAWA: My want to play for Coach, it definitely came from knowing that she was going to push me. I'm sure you guys hear that all the time but with Coach and the energy that I sense from her was she meant it. She meant every word that every day in practice she is going to push you to get your best out of you.

She has not fallen short on that commitment to me and I think that's why I'm here, why we're all here, because she has done that with each of us individually.

VANESSA DE JESUS: Same as Luch, but as a point guard her wisdom playing at every level, coaching at every level. That experience and wisdom is something I really looked forward to learning from and she is great mentor for all of us and that's a big part of why we want to play for her.

THE MODERATOR: Any more questions? Ladies, you're dismissed. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Kara, I know I asked the girls but I want to know from your perspective, is it sweeter knowing that you defeated your in-state rival today to get to the Elite Eight or is it just a win is a win?**

KARA LAWSON: I think what you're chasing is more important than who you have to go through. Think about it. What you're chasing has to take precedence over who you have to go through. We try to focus on that.

We have great respect for them and great respect for every team we've played, but I've always felt like that focus is it's best to do your job, not worry about who, but worry about what you need to do to win.

That's kind of been our mindset every game. I think that keeps you locked in the way you need to be locked in in this tournament.

So we're pleased to get the win. I'm sure our fans are happy, because, you know, it's obviously very heated. So I guess back home there's some backyard bragging rights maybe for our Duke fans in Durham, but I can't say I felt more elation going to shake hands because of who we played, it was because of what we just did, which is reach the Elite 8.

**Q. Coach, I've asked you this throughout the season. After this win what are you going to tell your ladies going into the Elite Eight after this sweet victory?**

KARA LAWSON: To stay process oriented with what we need to do next. We don't know who our opponent will be. There is a great game about to start. Once we find that out, we will go to work tonight and start to watch film or start to put film in front of them, obviously, and come up with a game plan and then work on getting that down as best we can in the short turnaround here to play on Sunday.

It's what we did last weekend and what we did at the ACC Tournament, so it's pretty formulaic for them at this point. They have an understand of what needs to be done to be mentally and physically prepared for the next game.

**Q. Your girls were really big off the bench tonight outscored UNC 26 to 6. Talk about the importance of the depth of the bench, especially being down 11-0 early.**

KARA LAWSON: If you've followed us all year, the bench has been pivotal. I don't know where we rank in bench points, but I know we consistently have the game changed by players off the bench and it's different ones. Most people around the country probably didn't have de Jesus on the Bingo today, but we did. And we know she can change the game for us. I have such belief in all ten players in my rotation and I know they can change games.

Our bench has won us a ton of games this year ask they continue to give us good minutes. I thought Koabel's minutes in the first half, she comes in and makes two big defensive winning plays, those were big plays.

Wood came in and got to the free-throw line and rebounded and hit the high post jumper on the flash against their sagging D, there are all these moments that I always go back and think about and I've seen them do that, make those plays against teams all year.

So that helps us, it helps us to have depth, whether we have foul trouble or whether we have a player who is not playing well. It's a luxury to have depth and they root hard for one another, too. So that's a nice part of it.

**Q. Coach, can you reflect back on summer of 2020 taking over a program in the midst of the pandemic, you guys were forced to have to cancel most of next season and here you are now in the first Elite Eight in 12 years. Just that journey for you and for your program.**

KARA LAWSON: When we got to Duke there was a lot that we needed to rebuild. It started, you know, just with how we were going to play and try to build an environment that is competitive was my first charge, create a competitive environment each day.

Then, I mean, you obviously have to recruit talent, so we started talking to players. My first conversation with Fournier was the summer of 2020. My first conversation with Donovan was the summer of 2020, Ashlon. We targeted young, high school players that we felt fit who we wanted to be. Who do we want to be? We always tried to look at it through that lens. We knew we weren't very good right then but who did we want to be? So we tried to sell some of the top talent in the country that we would be good at some point.

I have a lot of love and respect for those players because we weren't good then and we were competing and recruiting against the top programs that were good, that were going to Final Fours, that were winning national championships, and those kids made a choice, a conscious decision to say, hey, I think Duke could be something. I think they can compete at the highest level, I know it won't help right away but I feel like Coach and her staff can help us get there. They all made the choice, the players that are sophomores and juniors made the choice for Duke when we weren't in the tournament and we weren't going to Sweet 16s, and I will be forever grateful to them for that.

We just worked hard in recruiting and tried to get as many players that fit how we wanted to play and we're lucky that we were able to get so many to come.

**Q. How do you keep your morale up looking back to maybe even this morning getting dressed. Was there a certain song on your playlist that kept your energy afloat? As a coach you are constantly pouring into your players but how are you pouring into yourself?**

KARA LAWSON: I took a morning walk with my sister this morning, I like to walk on mornings just to relax. You're going to find out how boring I really am in this answer so here we go. Buckle up. I walked. I don't listen to music that much, it's not something that gets me going like that.

I like to spend time alone in thought to prepare for what -- kind of -- not necessarily visualize but sequencing, go through the game and what could happen and being ready as a coach of what move I want to make, this move happens, that move happens and so you're forecasting what are the potential things that could happen in the game and making sure that you're prepared.

Then I will usually draw some plays, I have the board and I will do that for a while. Make sure I'm efficient and my letters are legible. You don't want to be in a moment, it might be a 30-second timeout late in the game. You need to make sure that you're writing legibly. So that they can see it and they can understand where they need to go so I will practice my penmanship on the board, and eat and come to the game. Pretty much what I do.

**Q. You mentioned process earlier. In the process of building this program and understanding that it's still ongoing what have you learned about yourself as a head coach and what's necessary to sustain a winning program?**

KARA LAWSON: I guess I've learned that -- I don't know what I've learned. Okay, here is what I know. I know I'm built for this, so I haven't learned that. I knew that when I took the job. I know I'm built to do this job at a high level. So I haven't learned that about myself, but I've learned how to be more efficient through that process of building a team through the course of a season.

And then all the decisions that you have to make, I think I have become clearer and more efficient at making them, because there's a lot of decisions in this seat that you have to make, on and off the court. When you haven't been a head coach before you're making them for the first time, but then the second year you make 'em you're better at it, and the third year you make them and you're better at it, and you start to see the nuances of them instead of just that, and the decisions don't overwhelm you as much; they're expected now.

That's important in this seat because there are just a lot of things -- decisions to be made and you can't allow all the decisions to overwhelm you. So staying clear. I think I've gotten more clear in what I want and how I want to do it. Then once I fixate on that, I'm pretty good at just doing that. I get focused on it. Hopefully that answered it.

**Q. Kara, you're coaching in an era where it's obviously normal when players don't see something go the way they want, they get out and leave. You have a deep team and a lot of these players talk about the confidence you instill in them. I'm curious where that comes from you, is it something you learned from Pat and how that developed as you grew as a coach?**

KARA LAWSON: That definitely comes out of Coach Summitt. I would say the most important thing I took from her -- I took hundreds of things from her, how could you not, one of the greatest coaches in any sport in our country's history. I took a lot of things, but the thing that I felt was one of her super powers was her ability to connect

with her players and her ability to really get in there with them, get in the struggle with them. Stay in the struggle with them and work to help them get out of it.

You know, not just tell them what to do but be in there with them, instructing them. So that's something that I think I've grown in. I don't think I was bad at it, at first but the more you're around players -- because they have different personalities, so you can't cookie cutter your approach. How I get in there with V is different than Oluchi because they're different personalities. How I get in there with Reigan is different than Ashlon.

So I spend a lot of time thinking about them and thinking about what's the best way to get them to play their best. When you spend time -- so to me relationships are time over time. You spend time over time with someone and that's how you build trust. A position doesn't give you trust. Just because I'm a head coach that doesn't mean they're going to trust me.

So if you think that positions give you trust or give you respect, then you're going to be a poor leader. Time, over time, spend as much time with them as you can in groups and individually and learn about them. When you do that, they give you everything. You know? Because you have to be the first one to give everything as a coach.

So when they wake up every day I want them to feel not just know I want them to feel that they have a coach that's going to give them everything. And wants them to succeed.

So that's what we do for each other and that's our connection. We're so connected that way and that doesn't mean it's great all the time. We have hard conversations. We have tears, we have disagreements. That's actually normal in a relationship, isn't it? It's normal to have disagreements, it's normal to be frustrated with each other, it's normal -- that's a part of it, conflict is a part of it.

So we work through it together, and we're willing to sit in there and work through it together and that creates the bond. Then if you can create that bond, then this becomes so much more enjoyable, to see them get themselves to an Elite Eight is really cool to watch.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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