

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Coach Kara Lawson**

**Ashlon Jackson**

**Taina Mair**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Duke head coach Kara Lawson. As we start off, talk about the postseason that's gotten you to the Golden 1 Center.

KARA LAWSON: I want to start off by saying how excited I am to be back in Sacramento. Obviously I spent many years here playing and winning a championship here. And just a chance to see a lot of old friends and visit with them. And it's a special city. It's one of the great basketball towns we have in the country, how much they love the game.

Everywhere I've gone, I've had people thanking me for winning them their title here. And I think the banner's still in the Arena Bowl.

It's pretty cool to come back and see everybody, see some old friends. Got a chance to visit with Jerry Reynolds this morning, who is the GM that drafted me when I came out of college. And he came by practice and got a chance to talk to our team.

So much of what I learned about the pro game started here in Sacramento. So much of my journey started here, learning the pro style and learning from a lot of great teachers here.

So it's great to be back. Got a chance to visit some of my favorite restaurants, and it's been good.

As far as our team, we're looking forward to the challenge. And we're really proud of our season so far this year, to win the regular season outright and win the tournament championship. And now being in the Sweet 16 for the third



straight year, it's a great accomplishment for our group.

**Q. How have you seen Toby Fournier's game grow from when you recruited her. Obviously, she was viral for the dunking, but how have you seen her overall game kind of grow and evolve in her two years now with you?**

KARA LAWSON: I think every part of her game has grown. She has much more of an awareness on each end of what teams are going to try to do against her and where she can kind of leverage her advantages. She's a terrific athlete and very skilled as well.

She can finish with either hand. She's extended her range to the 3-point line this year as a sophomore. And she's adding some drives where it was mostly low post for her in her freshman year.

Defensively, her versatility has really helped us as a team because she can switch on to guard, she can play post players. And it gives us a lot of diversity in the schemes we can employ because of how switchable she is. And we definitely utilize that in different match-ups to our advantage.

She's a great rebounder as well and just overall a great competitor.

**Q. A lot has been said that after that first time when you played LSU is when things turned around for you guys and you went on that run winning those games if in a row in ACC play, obviously led to the outright title and the tournament title. Where do you feel like you guys have changed the most as a team from that first time you played LSU to now?**

KARA LAWSON: I think just settling into a rotation. One of the things that gets lost in our journey is we have three players out for the year with injury, three really good players.

And during that time we still maybe had one of them or two -- I really don't remember all that -- but we weren't settled in our rotation yet. It takes time to do that. I think once we



got settled in our rotation and we had the group that we knew we were going to have for the season, then we started to grow and really be able to get some connectivity.

Until then, it was different lineups, a player was in, a player was out. Ari didn't even start the season playing in games. Once we kind of got that group together, those seven players, we knew that's what we had, and we were able to get some continuity with it, we were able to practice together, able to get game reps.

All of that is kind of what you build through the season that gives you your chemistry. For us, we were able to turn that into winning more games than we had earlier in the year.

**Q. To follow up on that, what did you notice about your team in the days or the weeks following that loss that helped set up the run?**

KARA LAWSON: So I don't think that that loss was like the turning point or anything. We played a game two days later, three days later against Virginia Tech. That was our first league game in ACC play.

I would kind of push back at that narrative that that loss changed everything and changed the season. There were six of them. There were a lot of losses that changed the season.

I think we knew we had a game -- I think we played Thursday night, and then we had a game Sunday afternoon. That was our first ACC game of the season.

And we felt like, hey, it's a new season for us. What happens in non-conference, while it can inform what happens in conference, it doesn't have to, doesn't always. This is a chance for us to start it fresh. And it doesn't matter what our non-conference record is going into conference.

So we set our sights on the 18-game schedule, tried to be the number one team in the ACC and see if we could win that. And that's kind of what we focused on. And we were able to do that.

**Q. As a first-timer here in Sacramento, what's a good restaurant rec since you've said you had a bunch? Secondly, on familiarity, you guys played them a while ago, obviously. What have you grown or how have you seen your team grown since then and their team grown? How much do you watch that film versus the last couple games where they're a different team than they were three months ago?**

KARA LAWSON: What type of food do you like? There's

all good restaurants. I mean, I like -- if you like sushi, I like Mikuni. It's downtown, but they have it everywhere in the area. And that's really good. Taro is a good dude and he owns Mikuni. If I just want to get some lunch, I go to Jack's because they have good salads and good sandwiches. That's what I had yesterday and today. There's good Mexican here. There's good everything here. So you can find it. I just go to all my old spots and I get what I like. So it's been good.

As far as, I think we're both a lot different than we were the first time, and that's normal. I mean, we're coming off a similar situation where we played Baylor in the second round and we played them the first game of the season, and then we're playing them again in the tournament.

That long gap, there's things that you can learn from the previous game. But there's also things that you, know you, don't really apply.

They're one of the top teams in the country. Have some of the top players in the country. It's a challenge to play against them.

Obviously, we came out on the short end of the stick in December. So we understand what's in front of us and how well we have to play to be in the game.

**Q. Welcome back to the 916. Curiosity, could you share some insight, what this city has meant to you especially going back to your playing days, I hear from former Kings players how special this place can be. If you could just shine some light on that as well.**

KARA LAWSON: This place has meant a lot to my foundation, where I am now.

When I came out here playing and immediately coming to a team that was contending, and at the same time, the Kings were contending as well, some of their best teams.

Then I got one of my first broadcasting jobs. I was a studio analyst for the Kings for all 82 games. Watching Rick Adelman's teams play, I learned a lot about offense and how to play and how to move.

Obviously Chris and Mike and Peja and Vlade and Bobby Jackson, Doug -- Doug, who's the coach here now, all those guys, talking with them and being in the gym with them and working on our games and rooting hard for them.

And then all the people behind the scenes. Like I mentioned Jerry Reynolds and Scotty Stirling, who was a long-time scout here. We talked a lot about scouting players. And I learned a lot from him.

And Coachie (phonetic), Pete Carril was here, and Coachie used to give me VHS tapes of teams and actions he wanted me to watch. And you just learn the game.

And foundationally, I didn't know the pro game and I didn't know the NBA game when I got here. I didn't know the terminology. I didn't know the actions, so being able to watch a team like that up close and learn from that -- and then everybody here, just embrace basketball.

Wherever you went, they're rooting for you and they talk to you. Even now, I'm walking down the street and people are -- they said thank you and happy to have you back.

It's a special place here. It's kind of where I learned professional basketball and I learned how to understand it and what the terminology was. I think that shaped a lot how I coach. And the different places that I've gone gave me a great foundation being here.

**Q. When you think about all the changes that have happened in college basketball just over the last three, four years, how do you think about how you can use your voice to sort of advocate for how you want to see the future of this sport and how to advocate for your players?**

KARA LAWSON: I'm not sure anyone is interested in hearing my voice. I don't know that that's something that people are looking for. I mean, I try to do my job as well as I can. If I'm asked a question about something, I'll answer it to the best of my ability.

But I don't know that I'm looking to be, like, the voice of the sport or anything like that. That's not a goal of mine. I think there's plenty of other people out there that do a great job of being that.

For me, I've been in the college basketball, I guess this is my sixth year. When I came, everything started changing. So I don't have a view of the old way because I wasn't in coaching the old way. Just change has been what's been standard for me.

So however they change, you just try to adapt. I think that's what we're all doing. And you try to adapt to the best of your ability and be competitive and build a program.

To me, I just want to build a program that has consistency and that is teaching our players the right things on and off the court, and that they're having a lot of fun doing it, and that there's growth happening. And I think when you look at our program, we've been growing every year. And I think we're trending the right direction.

**Q. You said there are people who do a good job of sharing their voices. Whose voices do you think you lean on in terms of the women's basketball world?**

KARA LAWSON: I don't lean on anybody's voice. I'm just saying other coaches give their opinion, they do a good job of giving their opinions. I don't lean on any of those.

I think you kind of got to know what you like, but I'm glad I don't have to sit up there and answer the big-picture questions a lot I think other coaches probably get asked those more than me. That's good for me.

**Q. You obviously have familiarity with LSU and Flau'Jae Johnson as well. What do you remember about coaching her over the summer with Team USA, and how do you think, as her coach, you helped her manage those stretches in which maybe she wasn't playing as much as she hoped she would?**

KARA LAWSON: I think I answered that back in December. You can go and look at those comments. Thank you.

**Q. The international game has grown a lot and you've been able to coach Team USA. You've got an international superstar in Toby Fournier. How has the growth of the game abroad impacted women's college basketball?**

KARA LAWSON: I think the international game is impacting it more and more. There's so many more international players that are coming to college basketball. And that's impacting our game in a big way, as the talent continues to increase. All across the world is something you see, you see it at the youth levels.

Obviously being involved with FIBA and coaching the U.S. team, I see it at every level. There's so much talent. There's so much talent in every country and so many young players that are coming up.

I don't know the percentages. I'm going to guess that in women's college basketball, the percentage of international players is increasing. I guess that's the case. But you can feel that I think definitely the amount of impactful international players is increasing. Like a lot of the top teams have them.

**Q. You talked about watching the game against Baylor. From the start you guys on the defensive end were so locked in. And you said that as you were able to get longer in the season, your rotation sort of solidified. How much do you think that's helped you**

**guys on the defensive end to be such an elite unit on that side of the ball once you got those players healthy and everybody was able to sort of know their role and know their rotation?**

KARA LAWSON: We only have seven players that we play regularly. We obviously have more players than that, but that are in our rotation. So I mean, there's only so many combinations you can have with seven. There's five out there. They know who they're playing with. So sub or foul trouble, that kind of changes the rotation. But other than that -- so they have a great familiarity with one another. They understand how to play with one another.

I think they understand what the team needs from them and their roles, and everybody's accountable, because with seven, everybody's got to bring what they bring in order for you to have a chance to win. So they have an accountability with that as well.

**Q. I was curious if I could ask you about your time as a player in Tennessee. Many years ago, 2003, you went to the PMAC. It was the first sell-out in the history of LSU women's basketball.**

KARA LAWSON: What year was that?

**Q. 2003, February 22nd.**

KARA LAWSON: February 2003, I remember that now.

**Q. Do you?**

KARA LAWSON: Yeah.

**Q. Seimone Augustus is here coaching with LSU. She was a freshman that day. It was just a significant time for LSU women's basketball coming up. Pat Summitt and Sue Gunter and all that. What are your memories of playing at that time against LSU in those games and what it meant?**

KARA LAWSON: Incredible legend, Sue Gunter. She was always a really hard coach to play against. But she was always really complimentary after the battle. I remember she would in the handshake line she would -- at least to me -- she would say complimentary things about how I played.

That day was rockin' down there. That thing was loud. It was Moni's freshman year, and obviously played against her in the pros a lot. We played on the Olympic team together in '08.

Yeah, they were a really good team. It was a hard place to win. I think we won that day, but I think they beat us in the

tournament that year, if I'm remembering correctly. That was in Little Rock, in the championship game, I think they beat us. And we beat them in the regular season. And they beat us in the tournament. Yeah, everybody knew pretty early on how good Seimone was, even when she was in high school. You knew how good of a player she was going to be. You could tell the skill that she had. She could score the ball with such ease.

A lot of great players, obviously, for their program over the years. A lot of great coaches. Being in the SEC as a player was always tough. It was always tough. But it's a great history of a program and great fan base and just enjoyed those battles playing them every year.

And Marie Ferdinand was really good, too. She was a really good player. She was hard to guard as well.

THE MODERATOR: From Duke, we have student-athletes Ashlon Jackson and Taina Mair.

Ashlon, could you talk a little bit about the journey that's brought you to Sacramento for this weekend's competition?

ASHLON JACKSON: Just being able to compete at the highest level, everyone knows how our season started off. Having that turnaround, it was tremendous for us. We got a lot of reps at being uncomfortable and knowing what to do in situations that, I guess, led to our defeat in November.

But just playing our way out of that, playing together and competing every single day, trying to get better, we were on and popping by January.

Yeah, after that continuing to compete and thrive within the ACC. Great teams. Ended up winning obviously our season, regular season conference. And then going into the ACC Tournament with a lot of confidence, we ended up doing the same thing.

But just now being able to be here at the highest level with 16 teams left, we're just really blessed to be here.

THE MODERATOR: Taina, every team has goals at the start of the year. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what Duke's goals are and kind of where this sits in that list.

TAINA MAIR: Yeah, I mean our goals in the beginning of the season were to get better every single game and every single practice. And obviously with the start of our season, we understood that there was a lot of growth that needed to be done.

And getting here was obviously one of our goals was that we had internally. As a team we understood that we were going to keep our goals within the locker room, but obviously getting better. And it's something that everybody understood.

And, yeah, I think that we're just super blessed to be able to continue and to expand our season.

**Q. You guys have played together for a couple of years now. I'm wondering what the addition of Riley has meant to your chemistry on that perimeter trio and what she's been able to bring to you.**

TAINA MAIR: Riley, she's a super long, super athletic guard who can play the 4 position. She's great at hitting shots, especially over her smaller guards.

Just her addition offensively has been great for us as it opens up shots for everybody else, but also defensively her presence and her improvement from the summer to now has been tremendous. And her on both ends of the floor has been great for us all season. And she's going to continue to improve.

But I'm super excited for her to play in the Sweet 16, to go out there and show the world what she can do.

ASHLON JACKSON: Yeah, same thing. Her versatility opens up a lot for us. Offensively, she's a killer. And just to be able to see her growth over these past few months have been tremendous for us.

She's a big, big key for us in, not just on the offensive end but on the defensive end, as Taina was saying. But, yeah, to see her grow and continue to see her grow has been one of a kind.

**Q. You mentioned before, Ashlon, losing early on may have helped you guys. The familiarity, you played LSU. If you see UCLA, you played them as well. You beat Baylor, who you played. How much does that help you that you guys are probably different than when you saw them earlier in the season, you're more compact. Coach said you only have a seven-man rotation now. How much does that help you (indiscernible) the game tomorrow and potentially moving forward?**

ASHLON JACKSON: Yeah, I mean, I feel as though every team is not the same team that they were in November. They've grown a lot. We've grown a lot. So just to be able to have another opportunity at it is a really good thing.

I think for both teams we've just gotta go in tomorrow with a

different level of focus and just continue to be ourselves. And just be ready to compete at the highest level will be essential for us.

**Q. That last game against Baylor was probably one of your best defensive games of the season. Just for either of you, what can you say about how much pride this team takes on the defensive end?**

TAINA MAIR: I think we work on it every single practice and every single day, basically. So we understand what it takes to play at a high level defensively. And we did that last game, so we have a clear understanding of what defensive energy and presence we need to bring to be able to win in March.

We're just going to continue to work on that, improve on that, and get it to the highest level so we can continue our journey.

ASHLON JACKSON: Same thing. Definitely our ability to compete and change our mindset and not give up on any type of play, our team, we hate to lose in practice. We hate to lose any type of rep that we're given, especially defensively. So just having everyone with that same mindset was really big for us.

So, like Taina said, we'll just continue to build on that and continue to just do what we do.

**Q. You guys have that ritual at the start of the game where Toby dunks and it's a whole thing before. How did that come to be, and what does it do for you going into the start of the game?**

ASHLON JACKSON: Well, you know since she got here, pretty sure everyone knew who Toby Fournier was and her ability to dunk and how athletic she was. That just became a thing last year because we knew she could dunk it.

But I think also it's very fun at the beginning of the game, and I feel like it lets out a lot of nerves for us, like, all right, let's have fun. At the end of the day, it's just basketball.

But, yeah, having her do that every game, it's very funny.

TAINA MAIR: Kind of like what Ash was saying, it gets us all super hyped, especially me and Toby. I mean, after she dunks, we start like pushing each other and just celebrating. But, I think, for us is just to go out there and have fun and just be ourselves.

**Q. Coach's "Handle Hard Better" motto, what does that mean to you and how do you embrace it?**

ASHLON JACKSON: Well, honestly, that's used for so many things other than basketball. I feel like, with Coach, everything that she says, it's literally not just about basketball within her messages she gives us.

But I feel that message alone has been key to our season. We couldn't control our adversity at the time. But just being able to control what we could around that time, it was essential. And just being able to handle hard better in that particular moment was really the turnaround of our season. I'm very grateful that she gave that message long, long ago.

**Q. When Coach Lawson was up here talking, she talked about the impact that the city of Sacramento has had on her basketball life and the people that she knows here and the impact it's had. Has she talked at all about that with you as being in Sacramento for a Coach Lawson team? Does it add anything to this? Or, you're in the Sweet 16 and you could be anywhere?**

ASHLON JACKSON: She talked about it a lot, for me, personally. But just knowing her connections here, second to none. Just who she is alone.

We don't even have to be in Sacramento. The people that she knows, the people that know her, it's great. I feel like we're able to obtain that through Duke in general because of how prestigious our university is and how many people come from Duke. So that's really a great thing and a great thing to be a part of.

TAINA MAIR: Just to add on what Ash said, Coach is super humble, but I think as a team, we understand that she's played here and that she's created an impact here in Sacramento, especially in her WNBA career.

So for us to come out here and play somewhere where she's super familiar, in a place that she once called home, I think for us is super special as well. I mean, we take pride in just having Coach and having her back and all that stuff, so I think that it will be something memorable.

**Q. You said that Coach talked about it. What are some of the things that she's told you guys?**

ASHLON JACKSON: What do you mean? As far as being here? One, she loves, loves the weather. Also the food, as far as, like, what we were eating yesterday. We went to this restaurant. But that's not the point.

No, she talks about how her career went here and how she was a one-franchise person at that time. But then everything happened.

But just being able to hear her take on it and hear how her process went as far as ending up here, like Taina said, it's bittersweet, for sure, for her. But sharing that moment with her and also getting the gist of how she was here, like Taina said, it's just we want to have her back as far as her career and how she went here.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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